n+1

The Intellectual Scene

Heroes without War

Art Chronicle

Eggers, Teen Idol

Against Exercise

Paranoiastan

+ Fiction and Reviews

0 1>
74470 58387 5

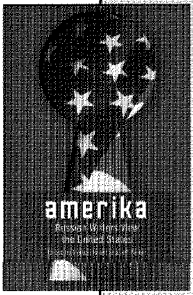
Number One, Fall 2004, $9 U.S./$12.50 Canada

n+1

Number One Fall 2004

DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS

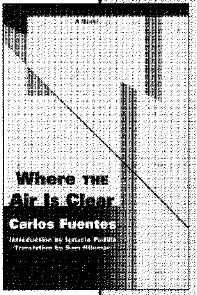
Recent Releases — *from* — DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS


amerika
Russian Writers View the United States

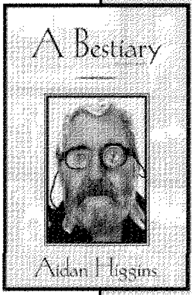
AMERIKA: CONTEMPORARY RUSSIANS VIEW THE UNITED STATES
MIKHAIL IOSSEL & JEFF PARKER, EDS.
Essays | $13.95 | ISBN: 1-56478-356-1

MR. DYNAMITE
Meredith Brosnan

MR. DYNAMITE
MEREDITH BROSNAN
Fiction | $13.50 | ISBN: 1-56478-353-7
A LANNAN SELECTION


A Novel
Where the Air Is Clear
Carlos Fuentes

WHERE THE AIR IS CLEAR
CARLOS FUENTES
Introduction by Ignacio Padilla
Translation by Sam Hileman
Fiction | $13.95
ISBN: 1-56478-344-8
A LANNAN SELECTION


A Bestiary
Aidan Higgins

A BESTIARY
AIDAN HIGGINS
Autobiography | $14.95
ISBN: 1-56478-357-X
A LANNAN SELECTION

www.DALKEY ARCHIVE.com

n+1
NUMBER ONE
FALL 2004

| THE INTELLECTUAL SITUATION |

THE NEW REPUBLIC: *Designated Haters* 5
MCSWEENEY'S: *A Regressive Avant-Garde* 7
THE WEEKLY STANDARD: *PoMo NeoCons* 9
THE NBA: *Human, Not Too Human* 10

| POLITICS |

Palestine, the 51st State 13
W. 14
A Bunch of Nobodies 16

| FICTION |

Horse Mountain Benjamin Kunkel 20
Fontana Sam Lipsyte 106

| INSIDE THE WHALE |

Eggers, Teen Idol Keith Gessen 38
Against Exercise Mark Greif 62
Art Chronicle Dushko Petrovich 116
The Black Iron Prison Joshua Glenn 152

| TRANSLATION |

The Norm Vladimir Sorokin 74

| FOREIGN AFFAIRS |

Reading Elsewhere Marco Roth 96
Paranoiastan Masha Gessen 124
Mogadishu, Baghdad, Troy Mark Greif 132

| REVIEWS |

On Jean-Christophe Rufin Marco Roth 167
On David Foster Wallace Chad Harbach 171
On James McCourt Patrick Giles 176

n+1

| Editors |
Keith Gessen
Mark Greif
Benjamin Kunkel
Marco Roth

| Managing Editor |
Allison Lorentzen

| Art Director |
Ryan Haley

| Consultants |
Chad Harbach
Christian Lorentzen

| Copy Editor |
Sam Frank

| Website |
Suzanne Scala

| Advertising |
Richard Grijalva

n+1 is published twice a year by n+1 Research, 895 West End Avenue, NY, NY 10025. Single issues are available for $9. Subscriptions for $16 (two issues); in Canada, $21; other international, $25. Subscriptions and correspondence to the Editors, Park West Finance Station, P.O. Box 20688, NY, NY 10025. Manuscripts will not be returned. Please correspond before submitting. *n+1* is distributed by Bernhard DeBoer, Inc. (973.667.9300) and Ubiquity (718.875.5491). To place an ad in *n+1* contact Richard Grijalva (617.522.4590 or ads@noziroh.com). *n+1*, Number One © 2004 n+1 Research. ISSN 1549-0033.

www.nplusonemag.com

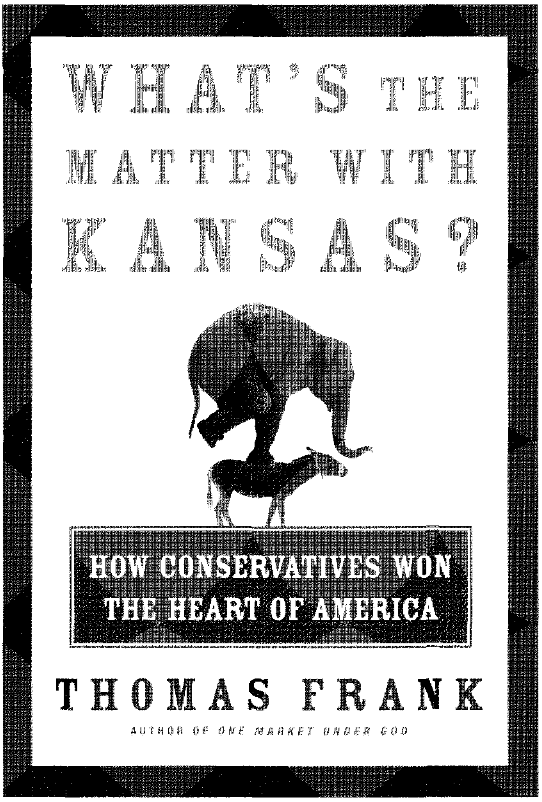
EDITORIAL STATEMENT

We are living in an era of demented self-censorship. The old private matters—the functions of the body, the chase after love and money, the unhappiness of the family—are now the commonest stuff of public life. We are rotten with confession. But try saying that the act we call "war" would more properly be termed a massacre, and that the state we call "occupation" would more properly be termed a war; that the conspiracy theories, here and abroad, which have not yet been proved true by Seymour Hersh or the General Accounting Office are probably, nonetheless, true; or that the political freedoms so cherished and, really, so necessary, are also the mask of a more pervasive, insidious repression—try saying all this, or any of it, and see how far you get. Then try saying it in a complex way, at some length, expressing as you do so an actual human personality.

We are living in a time when Nabokov and Henry James are read in Tehran but we have pornography and publicity at home; a time when serious writing about culture has become the exclusive province of bullies, reactionaries, and Englishmen; a time when journalists can refer to Vladimir Sorokin, a towering figure of Russian postmodernism, as a "shocking" writer who became a "best seller" after his books were trampled in public by a neo-fascist youth group; a time when a magazine like *Lingua Franca* can't publish, but *Zagat* prospers. In the future, it will be seen as the time when some of the best people in our intellectual class gave their "critical support" to a hubristic, suicidal adventure in Iraq.

The problem is hardly a lack of magazines, even literary magazines. Culture can expand now to fill the superstore. But civilization is the dream of advance—to find the new, or take what we know from the past and say it with the care that only the living can claim. "One must have been in exile and in the wilds to appreciate a new periodical," said Alexander Herzen, founder of the mighty *Bell*. Perhaps you live in the city or the town, and in the safety of your own country. But you have known the exile, and are acquainted with the wilds. +

Thomas Frank **offers a stinging and hilarious examination of how the wealthiest among us came to convince a nation that they speak on behalf of the people—and why so many Americans vote against their own social and economic interests**


WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?
HOW CONSERVATIVES WON THE HEART OF AMERICA
THOMAS FRANK
AUTHOR OF ONE MARKET UNDER GOD

"A brilliant book, one of the best so far this decade on American politics." —***The Nation***

"Frank [writes] with scholarship, understanding, passion, and—thank you, Mark Twain—such tart humor." —**Molly Ivins**

"Tom Frank has stripped the right-wing hustle to its core: it *is* bread and circuses—only without the bread . . . The best new book I've read in years."

—**Rick Perlstein, author of *Before the Storm***

"The most insightful analysis of American right-wing pseudo-populism to come along in the last decade."

—**Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed***

METROPOLITAN BOOKS
An imprint of Henry Holt and Company
WWW.HENRYHOLT.COM

THE INTELLECTUAL SITUATION

A Diary

WAKE UP LATE. Headache from somewhere. We drag ourselves to the front door to pick up the mail, sweating. At least if there were something to read! The mailman folded a certain thin magazine to fit it into the slot. We recognize it. Oh, we know it all too well.

Designated Haters

The *New Republic*, for quite a while now, has been a Major League culture magazine supporting a farm team political bureau. The authoritative back of the book lends its stature to young political writers, who lash out from their Beltway cribs. In the late 1990s this arrangement reached its apotheosis. While Martin Peretz, the owner, became the George Steinbrenner of magazine chiefs—impatient with editors, prone to embarrassing pronouncements (on Israel)—and the political writers got brattier, the literary section achieved an unprecedented standing. When the *New Republic* took a writer down—as it notoriously did with Toni Morrison, Judith Butler, Frank Bidart, Don DeLillo, Elaine Scarry, Colson Whitehead, Kurt Andersen, Sharon Olds, Thomas Pynchon, Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen, Barbara Kingsolver—people noticed. It was the best literary section in the country.

But its method was wholly negative. And, it eventually became clear, indiscriminately so. For the magazine's regular readers, a kind of repetitive stress injury set in. Some of the best critics were sent to do dirty work on minor figures. Lee Siegel, who commenced with deserving targets, was in a few years' time trolling publishers' mid-lists in search of small fry. (He is now the magazine's TV critic.) Somehow *TNR* got the best people and encouraged their worst instincts. Academic experts in their own fields were invited in to garrote colleagues they didn't understand. It was called being a "public intellectual." So our heroes embarrassed themselves.

Poor James Wood! Now here was a talent—but an odd one, with a narrow, aesthetician's interests and idiosyncratic tastes. He got crowned the Last Critic. The magazine's main writer on fiction since 1996, he became a man of whom it could be said, as Hemingway said of Mencken, "so many young men get their likes and dislikes from him." They liked his swift, impacted style, to be sure (it was perfect for online reading), but also, perhaps, his easy assimilation to the youth culture's *mode retro*. His lodestars were invariant, Coleridge and Hazlitt, Tolstoy and Flaubert—not just because they were on his school reading list, but because Wood seemed to want to be his own grandfather. In the company of other critics who wrote with such seriousness, at such length, in such old-fashioned terms, he would have been less burdened with the essentially parodic character of his enterprise. But there was no one else, or they were reviewing movies. The only way out was the hit piece, to which Wood alone brought dignity. He came on with sword and dirk, a courtly eviscerator: to see him stab a writer's flaws was a Roman delight. The one author he really championed and helped canonize was Sebald, whose deadpan pessimism pastiched a 19th-century Gothic style no actual writer ever practiced. Yet it was instantly recognizable as a style we long for from the past, like Wood's own—the silhouette of an intellectual world that was once rumored to exist.

What happened? They had all come to fight for civilization, and instead they fouled it up. Perhaps it's like this: you can go through the defense of taste and come out the other side, as if you'd jumped out the kitchen window into the alley dumpster. There is a kind of fake refinement that turns into a vulgarity baser than any other. It doesn't come from saying the worst, it comes from deciding what other people can't say—and adopting a bullying, innuendoish, dishonest tone in trying to shut them up. A word that turns up in *TNR*'s literary pieces is "tasteless." They use it in the same way you might reprove a toilet joke at the dinner table or around relatives. But with them it takes on moral weight. It's a very damaging mistake: the idea that sniffing out the tasteless is the same thing as taste. It confuses censoriousness with a faculty of judgment that links the aesthetic to the moral sense.

That was tragedy number one. Tragedy number two was to let authority fill the place of thinking. Leon Wieseltier's choice of a title for a book of essays by Lionel Trilling, *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent*, summed up the outlook. (The quotation belongs originally to John Erskine, but Trilling used it and it could easily have been his own—do recall, in your nostalgia for the fifties intellectuals, that lugubrious funereal tone.) The moral responsibility is not to be intelligent. It's to *think*. An attribute, self-satisfied and fixed, gets confused with an action, thinking, which revalues old ideas as well as defends them. Thought adds something new to the world; simple intelligence wields hardened truth like a bludgeon. Thinking is tiring, we commiserate. And *TNR* contributors are nothing if not intelligent. But to spill so much blood saying the same thing, over and over.

This was the real explanation for the shrill-whistled traffic cops on the political side: they were learning their technique from the literary detectives in the back of the book. When, in the wake of September 11, the Notebook section instituted its "Idiot Watch," a feature worthy of Rush Limbaugh, in which critics of American foreign policy had words pulled out of context and ridiculed, it seemed natural because it was a standard gambit of book reviews. Then they became warmongers of the nastiest sort—and it was Wieseltier, the literary editor, who showed up to argue for war on *Charlie Rose*.

With the emergence of the ridiculous Dale Peck, the method of Wieseltier's literary salon reached its reductio ad absurdum. Peck smeared the walls with shit and bankrupted the section's authority for all time to come. So many forms of extremism turn into their opposite at the terminal stage. Thus, the *New Republic*'s supposed brief for dry, austere, high-literary value—manifesting itself for years in a baffled rage against everything new and confusing—led to Peck's auto-therapeutic wetness (as self-pity is so often the refuge of bullies) and hatred of classic modernism (which, to philistines, will always be new and confusing).

It didn't have to be this way. If only they had allowed more positive individuality, cultivated something new, and still kept an old, dignified adherence to the Great Tradition, running continuously to them (as they hoped) from the New York Intellectuals, whose ashes were in urns in the *TNR* vaults if they were anywhere. This was a magazine that began with Edmund Wilson! They went too far, and they flipped. Even they must be tired of themselves. If you pinned a work of art to their nose in their sleep, they would bat it away with the same gesture. The defense of standards became a new vulgarity.

And what can we do, with thirty-six weeks left on our discount subscription? Forget about it. We're young yet: so we'll go and be among the young.

To the café, then, darkened but for the few spots of light by which we try to read. It's deafening, what with the roar of the espresso machine. (Or is that the pounding in our ears?) One young fellow, in the twilight, is reading a book of some kind. Our heart skips a beat. It's a literary magazine! No, wait, it's a grouping of fourteen multi-colored booklets printed in Iceland on sealskin.

A Regressive Avant-Garde

McSweeney's was briefly a significant magazine, and the Eggersards remain a movement of some importance. They represent a tight network of associates of the impresario Dave Eggers. Their journals and readings have staged the most commanding popular art-provocations of the last ten years.

The Eggersards should be compared to schools of the historical avant-garde, the short-lived groups that reorganized European literary culture around bohemian factions. Eggersards created an identifiable style. They generated a body of sub-literary work. Eggers proved himself a possibly significant writer. His genius for creating institutions of a less elitist literary culture (*McSweeney's*, McSweeney's Books, the *Believer*) is beyond question. And if his group restarts the engine of literary innovation and strife, then it will have performed a real historic service.

As far as content goes, though, the innovation of the Eggersards was their creation of a regressive avant-garde. The first regression was ethical. Eggersards returned to the claims of childhood. Transcendence would not figure in their thought. Intellect did not interest them, but kids did. Childhood is still their leitmotif.

The second regression was technical and stylistic. In typography and tone the Eggersards adopted old innovations, consciously obsolete maneuvers from earlier moments of creative ferment. No one claimed the techniques were new (that would have been dishonest). What the Eggersards did do was reliably void these old methods of their classic interest in a search for truth. "Here is a drawing of a stapler," Eggers wrote under a drawing of a stapler in *A Heartbreaking Work*. An allusion to the best-known work of a second-rate surrealism, Magritte's "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*." But the gap between word and picture is eliminated, a sexual connotation is erased. The joke becomes absurdist in the degraded sense, that is, pointless, and this proves to be the Eggersard touch. Rejecting the new, and the true, Eggersards attacked the avant-garde hope for any transcendence of present conditions.

The paratextual games that *McSweeney's* revived had a long tradition behind them. They bore the finger-smudges of Vorticism, Dada, and Surrealism—but most of all of *MAD* magazine. *MAD* wouldn't stop talking to you, in the margins, on the masthead, in the subscription info, even next to the price: "$.75 (Cheap!)" Eggersards sought to revive the pleasure of reading tricks we remembered from the elementary school library. Tonally, editorial text in *McSweeney's* was wide-eyed, juvenile, faux-naïf. The purpose of this combination of a deliberate embrace of obsolete novelties, from an era when ink-fingered printers actually set metal type, with a "who me?" innocence, was an end-run around a class-based problem of sentimentality.

Why sentimentality? To the Eggersard mind, the popular culture of our time, especially the capital-intensive medium of television, delivered precisely the kinds of emotions Eggersards earnestly wanted to convey.

But that culture did so in the form of low-status popular confessions or entertainment. Sentimentality and satire were the Eggersards' own two modes. They dreamed of *Oprah* and MTV's *The Real World*, but refused the class decline and loss of leadership that participation in open confession, or popular entertainment, would bring them. They had been reared on 1980s *Saturday Night Live* or *Spy*, in the comic mode once called irony. The one-note gag tone came so naturally. Satire preserved their superiority even while they recoiled from satire's tendency to nihilism; they were thoroughgoing, even prissy, moralists, and nihilism frightened them. The bottom line was a means of confession that could never make itself vulnerable.

Dave Eggers himself briefly seemed to be our generation's André Breton. Like Breton, he was a provocateur. He gathered allies as Breton had. He revived the institution of the claque as a tool in literary disagreements. He was likewise indefatigable in the generation of new spectacles, and hysterical about his public persona. Like Breton (*Nadja*), he attempted real literature in the form of memoir. Each man drew on a sentimental topic (parentless children, a woman's madness) to motivate an apologia for the literary school he had created, and to show how it manifested a practice of daily life. The Surrealists' preoccupation with the sex of women was Breton's underlying concern, as Eggers's subject reflected the Eggersards' obsession with childhood as a way of life. From raising a child as the treasure house of one's own moral genius (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*), to the editorship of anthologies for teens (*Best American Nonrequired Reading*), to a writing-tutor program (826 Valencia)—this is the substitute for transcendence in the Eggersard world.

The *Believer* is now the key object in their school's intellectual development. It moves the group away from the personal rule of Eggers. It also presents their version of thinking—as an antidote to mainstream criticism, which they call snarkiness. The Believer: now here's a figure who would have revolted intellectuals of the 1930s, 1950s, 1970s. (The echo in intellectual history is Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*.) Mere belief is hostile to the whole idea of thinking. To wear credulity as one's badge of intellect is not to be a thinker as such.

Early issues included a "child" and "philosopher" as core features. The *Believer* would learn a truth from one of each. The magazine seemed unconscious of the weakness of believing so hard in children and old men: either those who hadn't started lives of adult thought, or those who were just about done. We respect the philosophers they profiled, but the motif confused philosophers with white-haired dispensers of truth. That is not a thinker: that's Santa Claus. It led on one occasion to the tragic spectacle of Richard Rorty answering the *Believer*'s query, "Do you see yourself, in the coming years, continuing to respond to these charges of relativism, etc.?": "I think that what I write from now on will be pretty much rehashes of what I've already written. I don't have any new ideas." The profiles of children have had better luck celebrating kids' innocence and purity. The *Believer* profiles "tools." It lists writers that you simply must read. It believes in others, instead of itself.

Ultimately, the *Believer* is a book review. It has attracted writers we admire. It does differ in at least one particular from, say, the *New York Review of Books*, in that its overt criterion for inclusion is not expertise, but enthusiasm.

"Look out, you dropped one," we say to the poor young man.

"Oh, no! Is it dirty? Is it, like, bent? Is it the Rick Moody one?"

Look, there are holes in his t-shirt! He must have spent his last dollars on literature.

If we can't get help from our friends, we'll look to our enemies. At least they'll have something provocative. Something not-us. Our headache is getting worse. The newsseller, at his stand, is eyeing us as we paw through the conservative rags. Look, buddy, it's a free country! And we're sick.

But this isn't any help—oh, sure, it's malicious, but somehow also the same. We have to check the cover to make sure it's the right thing. Yup. Them, too.

PoMo NeoCons

Reading the *Weekly Standard* is like stepping into a parallel universe. Not an alien one; one nicely mirrored, left to right, so that "principle" reads "ɘlqiɔniɿq." You get the methods of the left without the nervous tang of powerlessness. Despite their control of the presidency, Congress, and much of the judiciary, the magazine continues to present conservatives as an embattled and victimized minority. It would require both a sociologist, doing factor analysis on William Kristol's yearly income and the moviegoing habits of the editorial board, and a psychoanalyst, individually treating its contributors, to explain fully the causes of the *Standard*'s determined sense of aggrieved entitlement. But it is simple enough to recall that the *Standard*'s founders and later stars, Kristol, Andrew Ferguson, and the sinister David Brooks, come from the traditionally Democratic, liberal constituencies of Jews and Catholics. Maybe you don't leave behind the underdog style at the White House back door or with a key to the Cato Institute washroom. This still doesn't explain the perversity of the *Standard*: it's not old-fashioned liberalism that gets turned to the dark side, on the model of older neo-conservatism, but some more radical left-wing anti-liberalism the younger ones learned in school in the 1980s.

Take the *Standard*'s conservative-themed cultural studies. Reviewing Disney's DVD re-release of early Mickey Mouse shorts, Garry Apgar gushes over *Band Concert* in language usually found in fashion articles or museum catalogs. "Mickey's face and gloved hands, which retain their crisp black-and-white purity, contrast superbly with his crimson suit festooned with lush green trim, gold braid and buttons." Writing about cartoons in a high style is meant to convince us that Disney belongs to an indigenous American "great tradition." What it belongs to is "cult-studs." Apgar's piece takes the techniques of Marxism-influenced cultural analysis—now available at a discount in most universities—but changes the expected pessimistic conclusions about alienation, loss of individuality, and the perpetuation of noxious ideology into a patriotic rhapsody. Disney's Mouse "continues to captivate the masses"—the masses?—"and provoke the creative mind—in part because [he] personifies the drive, optimism, and relentless quest for happiness that are core traits of America."

If the *Standard* wants to do for Mickey Mouse what Marxism did for tractors, who are we to deny them their fun? But when they try out Foucault, their articles get nasty. Adopting what partisans of political correctness used to call strategic nominalism, that is, a battle for the names of things rather than truth, Maggie Gallagher takes her stand against gay marriage. "If the courts transform marriage into a unisex institution," she writes, "the *New York Times* and *People Magazine* will be the ones speaking the public, normative language of the land, and it is we who will be privatized and marginalized." Gallagher repeats a starting point of Foucauldian literary and cultural critics: institutions create meaning, not individuals. Language is the site of a power struggle. "[C]apturing the word is the key to deconstructing the institution . . . If the word marriage includes same-sex couples, we proponents of the marriage culture will be silenced in the public square." It's Gallagher who thinks in terms of "capturing" and "silencing." She has preemptively adopted the language of the oppressed. Funnily enough, proponents of gay marriage have made their case in the very American terms of equal rights, equal freedoms, and equal responsibilities.

Like plenty of the fare at the *Standard*, these writers demonstrate a facility with the language, methods, and moves of disciplines thought to have been the exclusive preserve of the academic left. This may reflect the developing consciousness of a right-wing poststructuralism and postmodernism. Or it may just be the shaping hand of intelligent editors who have learned from the enemies they affect to despise. Whether from complacency or ignorance, too many of us with left-wing prejudices believed that "advanced methods" were enough to change the world. The *Standard* proves that learning to think strategically about symbolic forms doesn't necessitate any particular substantive politics.

Although, inevitably, most of the *Standard*'s editors and writers hail from the same Ivy League milieu as the rest of the Washington intelligentsia, they love to decry the secret elitism of their opponents. Of Molly Ivins, the Texas-based reporter and author of a popular anti-Bush book, one of the *Standard*'s senior editors writes, "No one does populism as ruthlessly as Ivins, a graduate of Smith College and a former reporter for the *New York Times*, who holds a graduate degree from Columbia." Yet this rhetoric should be familiar to those readers of left journals (also edited by Ivy Leaguers) who almost never mention George W. Bush without telling us of his Andover, Yale, and Maine WASP background. An older, politer, and more conservative conservative would abhor such arguments from authenticity and class consciousness—and would take seriously the lessons of Machiavelli about the public play acting of republican politics. But the pomo neocon has no problem suggesting that there is a social danger when those from elite backgrounds pretend to speak like commoners and claim to share the common interest.

What *Standard* writers prefer to do is allow those from elite backgrounds to pretend to speak like the philistine middle-class. From its birth in 1995, the magazine's shtick was the replacement of politics with cultural politics as its real weapon. The brave ordinary man doesn't need to share an income with them (and he doesn't), a neighborhood, school, or a social class. He just has to share "ordinary guy" cultural affiliations—a politics of Mickey Mouse, "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," and, yes, admiration for a Yale-educated prep school debutante president who would look superb "with his crimson suit festooned with lush green trim, gold braid and buttons."

TO A BAR, then. To drown our sorrows in drink in the daytime. We're parched, we're fed up with disappointments. The bartender sees we don't want to talk, turns the game on. Any game. Any game so long as it's all right, so something's right . . . but wait.

HUMAN, NOT TOO HUMAN

The athletes are too big. How big? Between 1963 and 1983, the average NBA player grew an inch, from 6'6" to 6'7", but his weight held steady at 211 pounds. Since then, along with yet another half-inch of height, he has packed on fourteen pounds of muscle. The change shows. It's become startling to see footage of those spindly fellows from 1983, with their slender shoulders, their vulnerable thighs poking out of their too-short shorts. Time-warped into our world, and denied supplemental nutrition, a few might be able to make it in the modern NBA; but fewer could survive the shirts-off inspection of a reality dating show.

This bulking-up process has transformed the game. In fact, it threatens to render the game obsolete. The artistry of basketball stems from the interdependence of its parts; the players must think and move as one, not just for violent bursts, as in football, but for longer, unscriptable lengths of time. A formal system is in place—the rules, plus the team's offensive or defensive scheme—but within the parameters of that system each player has the freedom to act according to what he sees, and to what he intuits about what he cannot see. If he knows his teammates well, and anticipates their movements correctly, the result is harmonious and often beautiful.

In the modern NBA, however, with a metric ton of humanity on the floor, there no longer remains room for five players to move. The isolation play, the two-man game, occasionally the triangle: formally speaking, these are the best the NBA can offer. Forget the fact that the basket is too low, no longer commensurate with our capacity for jumping; there's not even space on the court to accommodate all the bodies. For precisely this reason, many serious fans have turned their attention to the college or even the high school game. Meanwhile the NBA is coming to resemble bloated Hollywood, trotting out its stars more as icons of human potential than in celebration of their actual performance. We like to think of our professional sports leagues as permanent institutions—hence all the talk about athletes and teams making "history"—but a sport with no sense of proportion, already outgrown by its own best players, is probably in decline.*

Baseball faces a similar dilemma in the Creatine Period. (Only football, of the major American sports, seems immune so far. The field has proved wide enough to accommodate the advent, not to mention the ass, of the 400-pound noseguard, and the 500-pounder will probably fit as well.) The average baseball all-star has squatted, curled, and juiced his way from 199 to 211 pounds in the past ten years, and the effects on the game have been profound. Home runs are being hit at unprecedented rates, not just by Barry Bonds, but by the little guys as well. No position in sports has changed more in twenty years than second base, former refuge of the puny intellectual (Marty Barrett), now usurped by sluggers like Jeff Kent.

Because the dimensions of ballparks are irregular and subject to change, baseball would seem better equipped than the NBA to contend with the growth of its players, but in fact the trend continues toward smaller, homer-friendly parks. Strikeouts have also reached record levels, accounting for nearly a quarter of the total outs in the National League last year. And thus the elegant, seemingly inexhaustible language of baseball runs the risk of being reduced to binary code, 0 for strikeouts, 1 for home runs—and in both cases the rest of the players plant their hands on their hips and watch.

As the athletes became less human, they could also have become less meaningful. Instead, the entire culture has bulked up, and the American male body has become, in effect, a miniature version of the economy—for each, "health" has come to be defined by accelerating rates of production and consumption, regardless of the long-term effects. This goes hand in hand with the increasing economization of sports itself. Players and coaches no longer use the word "team"; they speak of the franchise, the organization, and the program, reflecting the newly accepted wisdom that the real game takes place on the phones and in the front offices. So perhaps it doesn't matter how absurdly huge our athletes become; they are fungible commodities that can be broken down into numbers and swapped accordingly. It must only be a matter of time, then, until science invents a method to combine players, as American companies now combine assets, forming, to begin with, the fearsome, four-armed, home run-hitting strikeout-pitching black-white RandyBarryJohnsonBonds®. +

---

* The numbers for the NHL are even worse: since 1973, the average player has added 2 inches and 20 pounds. The rinks remain the same size, however, producing the spectacle of tiny Euro-forwards squirreling around giant defensemen, hoping the puck squirts out from between their oak-like legs. The forwards are then faced with the unregulated pads of giant goaltenders. The result is a scoring drought that resembles scientific models of the post-global-warmed future.

www.nplusonemag.com

LABYRINTH
BOOKS

Columbia University's
Scholarly and Academic
Bookstore

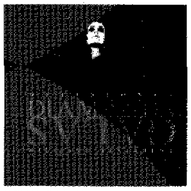
**Thousands of sale books–
new shipments every week.**

We ship anywhere in the
world. Order online at
www.labyrinthbooks.com

We buy used books!

LABYRINTH BOOKS
536 W. 112th
Between Broadway & Amsterdam
212-865-1588
www.labyrinthbooks.com

DIAMANDA
GALÁS



AVAILABLE JULY 27TH ON 2xCD
ENCASED IN A
PERFECT BOUND BOOK

INVESTIGATES THE ARMENIAN,
ASSYRIAN AND GREEK GENOCIDES OF THE EARLY 20TH
CENTURY THROUGH THE WORDS
OF EXILED POETS ALONGSIDE
GALÁS' OWN TEXTS

DEFIXIONES:
WILL AND TESTAMENT

AVAILABLE JULY 27TH ON 2xCD

A DOUBLE LIVE ALBUM RECRUITING BLUES, R&B, SOUTHERN
SOUL AND WESTERN COVERS AS
WELL AS GALÁS' OWN "BABY'S
INSANE" FROM THE SPORTING
LIFE, HER DUO ALBUM WITH
JOHN PAUL JONES

LA SERPENTA CANTA

DIAMANDAGALAS.COM • MUTE.COM
NORTH AMERICAN TOUR THIS FALL

POLITICS

Memoranda

PALESTINE, THE 51ST STATE

A Palestinian state will come into existence, some say, by a "two-state solution." Some say a "one-state solution." They are not thinking big. A fifty-one state solution—that is the answer.

The offer of US statehood to the Occupied Territories on pre-1967 boundaries is the real solution to everyone's problems. Israel gets its staunchest ally as its neighbor. Palestinians get the rights and responsibilities of American citizens, plus federal relief. America receives something better than an uncertain and tenuous American-style democracy "in the heart of the Middle East." It gets America in the Middle East.

Conservative commitments to states' rights will be put to a proper test. It may be that Palestinian voters wish to enshrine different lifestyles under their state law than do, say, Alabamans. Existing United States law provides the best framework for dealing with any conflicts. There is judicial review, and law in Palestine, USA, won't keep any citizen from rights (free assembly, due process, maybe soon gay marriage) that he'd enjoy in the North American part of America. But Palestine, USA, might add features to American life not existing elsewhere. High-stakes backgammon will become a championship sport; Arabic will be taught in public schools.

The upshot is this: the IDF will go home, since Americans won't want them occupying one of our states.

As for Israel, this innovation should settle once and for all the nation's right to exist. Israel's freedom from infringement by eastern neighbors is assured. No more worry of long-range missile attacks from Muslim countries: the US wouldn't stand for any projectiles accidentally straying across one of its fifty-one states, any more than it would allow Mexico to bomb Canada via the Midwest.

In the state of Palestine, with its red, white, and green license plates, resurgent secularists and closet peace lovers from both sides of the border will parley in renewed universities, on rebuilt roads, and in a new landscape of malls, cinemas, TGI Fridays, Home Depots, and enormous New Deal-like public works projects. The congenitally or habitually violent among the Palestinian youth will receive the same shaping-up process that America offers its own bored and weapons-obsessed adolescents: training in the US military.

Jewish settlers in the 51st state of Palestine—many of whom are Americans anyway—will be protected by US law, surely a more reasonable arrangement than their current protection by a country in which they do not actually live. They might wish to leave in the face of the loss of Israeli tax breaks, however. The more messianic will find their mission of settlement to be in a confusing position. They might wish to return to Israel, to remain in our newest state, or to travel to the old North American portion of the US to proselytize within the wide diaspora of "lost," that is to say entirely assimilated, Jews.

The benefits to America, too, are clear. At a cost of 200 billion dollars the United States is installing by force a "stable, democratic regime" in Iraq. It doesn't look stable. It is hard to know whether it will be very democratic. A fraction of the cost would support a US state the size of Palestine. The very best thing America has to export is the Constitution. And no need to pay for an occupying army—only xeroxing.

Really, to offer statehood is the least we can do. The worst the Palestinians can do, for their part, is refuse. At least we'll have asked. This would be a lot more polite than the Israeli occupation, or our invasion of Iraq.

Even the name of our newest state is American. Private Jessica Lynch, heroine of the invasion of Iraq, hailed from Palestine, West Virginia. A healthy reminder of our Judeo-Islamo-Christian heritage. There will only be the matter of adding another star to the flag.

—MR, MG

W.

1. W.: MYSTERIES OF THE ORGANISM

In George W. Bush, we have a president for whom reading a teleprompter is a physical exertion. Each line accomplished brings a panting release of breath. His best trait is his doggedness. Another man would have realized his failings and tried to do something about them. In W., his indifference to his deficiencies, his shameless willingness to do things for which he is unfit—e.g. read, speak, lead a political community—are, alongside his noble birth, his main strengths.

Character tells in public appearances. W. often looks confused. His brow tightens as if he were enduring some pain he can't quite locate. It could be on his foot, in his bowel. But it is the pain of thinking, or speaking, itself.

His underlip rises to cover its mate. His chin collapses his face from underneath, as in the frozen mastication of the retarded. The upthrust chin is as much W.'s characteristic expression as it was for Charcot's lunatics. The two lines that emerge pointing downward between his eyebrows when he thinks he shows anger resemble the expression on the mute face of a baby, about to throw a tantrum. They are the mimicry of anger in a stunted face.

W. is a close stander. He once allowed Brit Hume to interview him in prime-time, because his poll numbers were low. He showed America his golf putting, his dogs, his way of talking to children, his skill at sitting. He demonstrated his verisimilitude. You could see that even Brit Hume was nervous at finding that W. stands too close. In the absence of character, he tries to suck definition from others in his proximity—as if to assure himself that their uprightness will keep him erect, within distance of touch.

W. is a tongue thruster. You see that little pink muscle flicker outwards between his pale lips frequently during a speech. W.'s tongue is the gremlin soul announcing its presence, the unformed, fetus-like, moist juvenility inside the mannequin.

As he nears the end of his speeches, he becomes complacent. You detect the flash of a spoiled grin. It indicates: "I got away with something." W. is the curious figure who learned to get away with things that weren't rebellious. What he got away with was dutiful conformism.

W.'s is the heroism of just functioning. Our leader has grown expert in his way. We have watched him gradually become assured. His triumph over adversity has given him the opportunity to mortgage the economy, wreck foreign relations, despoil the environment, and cause the deaths of innocents. If you can manage to hold the small things together, as W. has, you can ruin the big things utterly.

It is unfortunate that W. is our president at a time of crisis. For W. is really a president for an era when all problems are solved, when poverty has been eradicated, illness and strife abolished, and peace and goodness permanently assured. His reign speaks of a time of perfection, when even an idiot might rule. His ascension to the throne is the gesture of a completed democracy. In this heaven, the meanest citizen could be trusted to steer the state. In the balked but eager physiognomy of George W. Bush we have our most utopian image of American life: a reflection of the blessed land over which even this man could be trusted to rule.

2. THE AUTONOMOUS FOLLOWER

Some on the left compare W. to Hitler. Nothing could be more wrong.

It is our embarrassing distinction in the United States to have acquired a follower as our leader. The younger Bush is a believer. You don't picture him on the podium at Nuremberg. No, you see him in the third row of the crowd on the rally floor. Look for his face, there, among the other sons! Witness our little man, W. His face shining with perspiration, he puts all his spirit into the regime salute. How smartly he swallows everything. For the Leader! For Homeland Security! (*Für die Sicherheit der Heimat!*)

When he wore his flight suit on the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, he was being true to something deep inside him. It had to be a tight little outfit, a uniform he could zip right up the front. A statesman's suit, presidential garb, must feel wrong to him. He needs to be reminded of his happy days as an Andover cheerleader. He wants his crotch tightly cupped in nylon, secure as a flyer in someone else's plane.

Could W. be a new type in history? Let us think of him as "the autonomous follower."

In the old era of bureaucratic conformism, people talked about the follower, the organization man. This functionary could commit acts of cruelty and stupidity just by carrying out orders. Don't we have a mental picture of this ninny, wrecking nations, laying waste to continents, executing criminals without a second thought, mistreating prisoners of war, and creating vast pools of victims, domestic and foreign, all because some higher-up told him to? He was "only following orders." That was an aspect of rationalized hierarchy. But W. is achieving similar disasters without anyone giving him orders. He—incredibly—is the one giving orders. And yet he seems to be no Führer himself.

W. seems to lead, that is, to make functional decisions that are not dictated to him. He has his advisers, whose questions to him, answered on a principle of simplicity, become his doctrines. But the source of right is somewhere outside of W., in his God, or his notion of good and evil. By keeping it outside of him, never doubting, he sheds its terrible nimbus onto the White House and the departments. We see an administration that has merged politics with belief and separated it from thought.

The sine qua non of the autonomous follower is his belief in automatic action with no agent. All good people, and he most of all, are only instruments of an order which is supposed already to have been made.

Perhaps Poppy Bush made the order, speaking psychologically. Perhaps Our Father made it, theologically. Perhaps W.'s advisers know who made it, and will tell him. Perhaps "democracy," which W. loves only in the guise of a vast instrumental mechanism, grinding across the globe, a teleology of the world-spirit—perhaps free markets and democracy made the order inevitable.

Freedom, W.'s favorite word, is the word he understands least. His unconscious philosophy is necessitarian. Ask him what mistakes he has made and he can't think of any. To make a mistake, you must have had a choice.

In this way he can take for granted that he is an instrument of good without being arrogant or ambitious. It is one of the most appealing things about him. "I am a lowly sinner," he announces to his evangelical constituents, by which he reminds himself of his own exemption from responsibility and his redemption by divine unfreedom. He makes up orders that are assembled from the bric-a-brac of instruction, correction, remembered adage, childhood experience, assumed law, scripture, in a collection of string, paper trash, and bits of bright foil.

W. was corrected many, many times as a boy. Those corrections make up his truth. You can see and hear it in every speech. It is what gives his face its extraordinary air of inexperience, of innocence. He is not facing reality and trying to think; he is squinting and trying to remember his lessons. When W. addresses the bad guys to pronounce their doom, and exhorts the decent people to trust in the good things to come—when he promises everything, regardless of reality, assuring his listeners they have nothing to fear, and nothing to pay, because nothing costs anything, in a world of final security where two plus two equals either four, or five—we hear W. addressing himself, not America. He is catechizing himself.

—*MG*

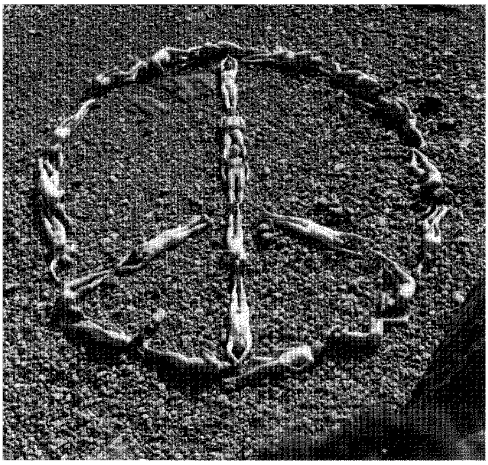
A Bunch of Nobodies

Who degrades or defiles the living human body is cursed, / Who degrades or defiles the body of the dead is not more cursed.

—Whitman

Two sets of images bookend our Iraq War. First, there were the photographs of the naked protests of men and women, in what seemed to be the most ineffectual or deliberately trivial dissent, at a time when not even articulate dissent on a mass scale could stop the war. Now, we see photographs of the naked, piled bodies of men, sandbags on their heads, and Americans laughing at them.

The naked protests that began in West Marin, California, at a place called Love Field, on November 22, 2002, may have been whimsical, but they were the most moving and lastingly remembered gestures of protest in the run-up to the war. The point was just to show flesh: the healthy bodies that everyone forgot about in the discussions of WMDs and US power. Extraordinary that people can discuss war without saying to themselves, over and over: "we will kill people, we will maim, we will destroy flesh, we will burn and harm. That is what we are planning to do."

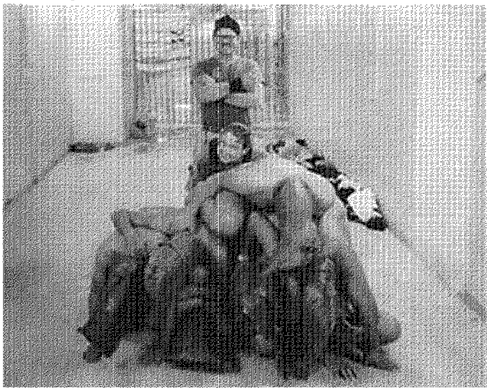


The naked protests, which spread across the globe, were a reminder of what went unsaid. Because the pictures were shot from above, they recalled the bombs that would drop. A peace sign looked like a target. Or the human peace signs drew imagined targets on the landscape in order to turn them back into peace signs. The purpose of these messages, made by neighbors, strangers, local inhabitants in a landscape, was just to say that if all the human beings beneath the gun sights could express their true emotions, they would call for peace. If only the bombardiers could see the people they were killing, without their uniforms or national dress, they would see that they were killing common soft flesh. If only the thousands of imperiled bodies could be identified in their mere human body-ness, with little traces of individuality—the woman with the red hair, the man who was so tall . . . How could the pilots pull their levers then? You see how hard it is to put into words what these pictures make you feel. The words are hokey, the sentiments old. But it's true: no one wants to be burned alive by those bombs.

This was an action of people consciously manifesting themselves, not as individuals, but as human beings. It was possible for them to make the body into a sign because it delivered a common message belonging to all vulnerable people as such.

(That was the beginning of our war, for some of us. Then the college kids went on spring break, they bared their breasts and pulled down their shorts, they photographed one another passed out in hotel rooms, and they knew that they were living the best part of their lives in the best nation on earth.)

Sex is one of the first things we'll export to the Middle East. US sexual iconography has already made a dent in other cultures, from India to Jordan. The Abu Ghraib photographs are a logical extension of what we already do, and a measure of how dumb we've gotten. Our TV networks rushed to tell us facts they thought we wouldn't figure out, like an anthropology lecture: Muslims don't like to be pictured naked with each other. It might be humiliating to be thrown together with a strange woman, or with other men, or made to simulate sex for the camera. Have we come so far, that we need to be told? You had the nauseated recognition, when the images flashed onscreen, that our beautiful freedoms were being used for torture.



Abu Ghraib turned something we Americans do for pleasure into a weapon. The cruelty was all wrapped up in the flag. To be free in America, dangerous and still safe, an outlaw and yet banal, all you need is a tattoo, a visit to Mardi Gras, or a digital camera and willing acquaintances. Americans happen to like sexual self-portraiture, in frat houses and bedrooms and, above all, basements. We lie down on shag carpets, against tacky woodgrain walls, or in dungeons which are just bicycle chains looped around a weight bench, and wonder how our mugging will look for the camera. It is the underground daguerreotypy of the nation. But we weren't supposed to take it abroad.

What is freedom for? Either it's the freedom to live free of the burdens of conformity, constraint, and expectation, or it's a freedom to bring other people under your power. Because of the way we live, the basement of the American mind fills up with the sexual use of other people. Even on the subway and in the street, porn-i-color daydreams issue through our mental viewfinders. We are sexual directors, actors, and audience, but no longer partners or participants.

You can escape our bombing maybe, but you can't escape our fun.

—*MG*

Forthcoming from the Crown Publishing Group in January 2005

LAUGH/RIOT

or THE MISCEGENATION OF MACON DETORNAY

A NOVEL BY

ADAM MANSBACH

Author of Shackling Water

"A literary debut of breathtaking splendor. Equally at home with hip hop and high cultural classicism, this is a true artistic gem."

- Michael Eric Dyson

"Adam Mansbach is the white Richard Wright, and Laugh/Riot is our generation's Native Son."

- William Upski Wimsatt

"As auspicious a debut as Colson Whitehead's The Intuitionist... even those who don't know a whole note from a grace note will revel in glorious song and history both. A wonderful accomplishment."

- Kirkus Reviews (starred)

First printing of 50,000

Soon to be a major motion picture from
director Adam Bhala Lough

THE CROWN PUBLISHING GROUP

ADAM MANSBACH HAS already established himself as "a veritable multi-culti code switching genius" *(San Francisco Bay Guardian)* with his critically acclaimed debut novel, *Shackling Water*, "the best fictional work about jazz since James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*" *(Library Journal)*. *Laugh/Riot* is the book he was meant to write – an epic mash-up of the *White Negro* and *The Eminem Show*, and a wildly creative hip-hop remix of the *American Race Novel*.

Laugh/Riot follows Afrocentric whiteboy and Columbia University freshman Macon Detornay's meteoric rise to national prominence following a string of racially motivated robberies that he commits against white passengers in his New York City cab. Thrust into the spotlight, Macon founds the Race Traitor Project and calls on white people across the land to apologize for four hundred years of racial oppression. What follows is a disturbing meditation on the impossibility of white liberalism, or even white radicalism, ever forging a solution to the nation's most terrible legacy

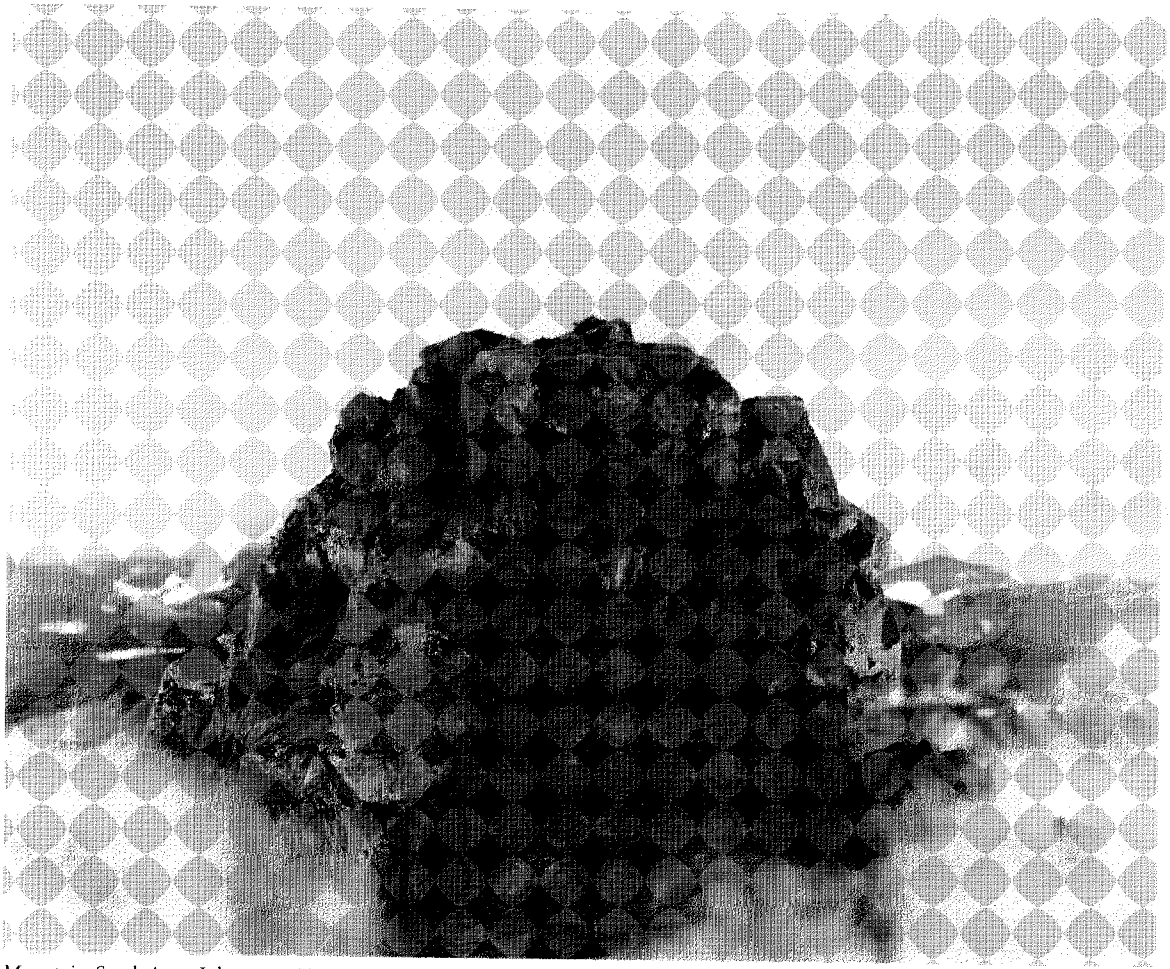
The work of a writer coming into the full strength of his creative powers on the most challenging imaginable subject, *Laugh/Riot* will be essential reading for anyone interested in understanding, race, hip-hop, and whiteness in 21st-century America.

Sign yourself up
for the reinvigoration
of civilization and,
while you're at it,

n+1.

Subscribing is easy.

www.nplusonemag.com



Mountain. Sarah Anne Johnson, ©2004

HORSE MOUNTAIN

Benjamin Kunkel

THE OLD MAN went down on one knee like a clumsy courtier and after steadying himself and making sure he wouldn't topple over, he brushed away loose, loamy soil with the hand the stroke had spared—he'd had a second apoplectic stroke two months before—and located the beginnings of a pale root. He yanked up the hound's tongue, as the weed was called, and sighed. He stood and righted himself, less of a labor than a few weeks ago, and stuffed the weed into the left hip pocket of his overalls, fingering its velveteen leaves.

On Sundays he always had his choice of fresh laundry and always he put on these, his newest pair of overalls, to garden in the morning. The stiffness of the denim was like that of a starched uniform, and to pull the hard fabric over his loose pale thighs made him feel like someone charged to carry out some task.

At least the tasks in the garden were his own. He'd always hated receiving orders, whether from his parents or from teachers, from superiors in the service or, later, from managers, clients, or employers. This was a part of the explanation he gave himself for why his life had been what it had been, with no stable career and never much money. He was tempted to be proud of his refusals, even if in one or two cases they were more accurately considered failures. Yet even now his life was structured by orders—doctor's orders—to do with diet and activity, and it seemed to him that as old as you got the commands pursued you. And he himself, as a father and a husband, as a building contractor, as a ski-instructor, lastly as a landscaper employing a series of foolish assistants—he had given plenty of orders too.

His wife turned out of the driveway in her silver Subaru. The car was perpetually covered by a mist of red dust from the road. Anna, on her way to church, waved as she passed by. The old man raised up his good hand. He himself set no store by Christ, thinking of Jesus as at best a cracked social reformer, a man who lived and died, and suspecting that Easter fell when it did in order to overlay the spring-time rituals of Middle Eastern vegetation cults, as he might have read at some time in a book. Nevertheless he was glad for Anna's sake that this alleged anniversary of that alleged resurrection was such a fine day as to fit nicely with the legend.

But the perfect weather made him most of all glad for himself. These were the Colorado days you would write home about if this weren't already your home, the sky hardening above like enamel, and so deep in color that by noon it would smack of outer space. There was a nice Christian word for sky which he couldn't think of just now. Often these days he lived in the company of forgotten terms. He prodded at a missing word with his tongue as at a sore inside the cheek, and sometimes the word would return to him—on Friday he had remembered *lark bunting* an hour after the bird alighted on the feeder—and more often not.

Whatever the old word for it, at 11 AM the sky was already scored with three contrails but otherwise a kind of natural absolute. There was always at least one line of vapor up there: rich people constantly in and out of the Vail Jet Center, so-called, though the ski area was a forty minutes' drive from the ocher gypsum scrubland where the runways lay.

He had been in the Eagle Valley almost as long as the town of Vail itself, a town so young that it had no cemetery—unless it was that the rich didn't die. More likely it was real estate costs that kept the dead out. Whoever was vice president one way or the other always seemed to come out in the winter to ski.

The old man had taught such bastards, as well as many decent people, how to telemark ski back when he was able-bodied and could ski in the beautiful way, one knee then the next, torso squarely downhill, which few of the tourist ladies had failed to remark on. Naturally there had been a few dalliances. It was something he would not do again—not either thing.

Once more he stooped and yanked up some hound's tongue. He'd reached the end of a row of melons, where lemon cucumbers grew on a trellis. There were few weeds because he weeded and watered each day, save Tuesday. That was the day Anna ran errands in Glenwood, and therefore his own sabbath.

Firmament—that was the word for the sky. But at the memory of it he realized that today wasn't Easter at all. He must have dreamed it was Easter, he didn't know why. Of course it wasn't; it couldn't have been even if he had nothing to go by but his senses. The growing season was short at this altitude, and killing frosts into the month of June were not unknown. Now it was full July, as he should have known all along. It was warm, and cicadas crackled like loose electricity in the trees.

Once, a long time ago, away at college, he had dreamed of the death of his dog, only to forget his dream come morning. It was strange: not until his father told him over the phone that they had put the animal down did he remember the dream that had led him to assume this had already taken place—so that to hear the news was to recover and lose the animal all at once. Sparky was the name of that dog; and had the old man not been confused about Easter, he would never have remembered what he had just remembered.

He moved into the shade of a crabapple tree, turned and surveyed his three quarters of an acre: spinach and broccoli, sunflowers and hollyhocks, Japanese eggplant and spaghetti squash, tomatoes which the birds had mostly ruined despite the warning presence of abstract balloons patterned with god's-eyes and twitching on their poles.

At the sudden noise of wings he looked behind him and saw a struggle there, by the peeling tool shed. A garter snake had been caught and seized by a red-tail hawk. The sharpness of this event, in the middle of eddying thoughts, astonished him. He found that it was in him to watch with a boy's playground curiosity as the snake met its end; but all the same he picked up a clod of dirt and threw it at the hawk, which panicked and flew off gripping the snake. The old man looked up into the air, and at more or less the same moment that the sun blinded him, the falling snake brushed his forearm and gave him, in the sunlight, one of the true chills of his life.

He stood looking at the gooseflesh on his arm, and when he turned back to the sky the bird was gone.

He knelt down and with one of the big fingernails of his left hand (the right hand being of little use, his fingernails on the other side were often too long), he poked at the snake. He was indescribably relieved when it moved.

Before leaving the garden he went to the lemon cucumbers and took one of the pale yellow oblongs from its vine. Why did they sell the other kind in stores when these were so much better, sweeter? As a child in school you are asked your favorite flavor; vanilla, he'd always replied, and that was his taste in things, for what was mild and sweet. His vices had never had to do with the famously intense pleasures of sex or drink, though he'd liked both well enough. He was a true voluptuary only when it came to the feeling of which for some reason the taste of vanilla, or lemon cucumbers or coconut meat, reminded him: the pleasure of being subject to no one but yourself.

He had never been anywhere exotic but Hawaii—the war having ended not long after he enlisted, he'd made it no further than Biloxi, Mississippi—and in Hawaii, where their boys had sent him and Anna four years ago, one thing the old man had especially enjoyed was the fresh coconut.

The curious fact was that he had been born in Hawaii; his father had been teaching at the university there. No proof of this existed, his siblings and parents gone, but a black-and-white photograph of three tow-headed children, he the smallest, beneath the dark headdresses of four towering palm trees. Seventy years later he'd taken some pleasure in the fact of returning to and eating the fruit of his natal place. That was one effect of the trip: it allowed him to touch the white source of an alternate life. The touch was strange, because, like any old person, he had gotten used to his conditions and himself. With powerful clarity he'd understood that he could have avoided his marriage that had consisted of too many quarrels. He didn't like that he and Anna fought; it was the worst fact of his life. But they differed about everything and were both proud. Usually it was he who prevailed in material questions, where someone had to: a general victory with many lost campaigns and something only slightly less distasteful to him than it was necessary. He could be a real son of a bitch, even if mostly he was all right. Lately he had harangued Anna on politics and religion as much as ever. It was all made worse by his slow speech, slower since the stroke. But especially since the stroke he needed to show that he could fight.

Still, everything had been better since Hawaii. Between the two tall living room windows, where they sat to watch the birds, hung a sunset picture of Anna and him in leis. In Hawaii he'd remembered that he might have lived differently; then he'd become easier to live with. The two things were certainly connected, but the famous wisdom of old men was not enough that he understood how.

A day like this could put a crack in your heart. The beauty hurt you in a small indetectable way, equivalent perhaps to a hairline fracture. It would be nice to think that beauty caused your frailty, the load of it mounting like a heap of blossoms and crushing you in the end. Yet you just died, and that was that; and because the old man had had two strokes and a double bypass, he knew that he might go at any time, that his time was probably short, that life accelerated imperceptibly with every moment, and that there was nothing to do, therefore, but to put on a brave face and to cram the passing moments with so much attention to the world that they would bottleneck, and pass slowly, lest they slip by too sheer to be touched.

Possibly today was the day, fine as it was, that he should climb up Horse Mountain, as he had been thinking of doing. He wanted to do it at least one more time.

He walked out of the garden with his dragging gait, his right side trailing slightly. To move like this, one side a bit in front of the other, made him feel like a door left slightly ajar, one that might, at any moment, be thrown open and walked through.

On the other side of the footbridge, across Salt Creek, all was coolness and shade. The creek divided the two sides of his life. On one side were the garden and tool shed, and therefore his morning solitude. On the other side were the house and his life with Anna, and his books and his bed. The mountain on the opposite side of the road was a ragged business of friable red sandstone the color of

Mars—a sun-scoured place of pinion, juniper, and the odd cactus. So it was in Colorado, dry southern slopes facing the shaded northern ones like separate worlds.

He moved across the bridge. His son Fred had paid to have it covered like an ark, the old man being apparently too old to shovel it clear in the winter anymore. Here, above the purling stream, you could still see the ruins of a little dam built by some grandchildren, back when they were children indeed, in the hopes of capturing rainbow trout. Fred's boy, always good about coming by, had come only yesterday, old enough to smoke a cigarette in front of his grandparents and to talk, insouciantly, in the leisure of his youth, about a girl in New York he wouldn't be surprised to marry.

The old man stepped off the bridge onto the stone path he had laid down himself. The coolness and moisture over here were enough that quaking aspen shaded the jigsaw piece of a lawn; and rearing up above the aspen, with their flashing silver-green leaves, was Horse Mountain itself, dark with spruce and fir, so that the mountain was a mass of somber color, and you could see none of the stone of which it was made.

On this side of the bridge the old man slept and ate and talked with Anna. Over here he wore, instead of overalls, cotton pants and wool sweaters, and he read books and listened to music for as much time as he could sit still in comfort. Then his bones would begin to ache. And lately there was a new difficulty: his eyes had begun to water if he read for more than twenty minutes at a time. A late change in the marriage occurred when it became necessary for Anna to read his books aloud to him.

These books became, in this way, public books. Anna didn't like to pick one up without knowing what had gone before, so she read them aloud in full. She was an intelligent woman; it was a shame she hadn't been to college. These days he was making Anna read out loud about the Middle East. Occasionally she would pause and say, "I can't believe that all of this is true. He must have a bias."

"Ah, go on," he would say.

The decision to read up on the Middle East was based in his dreams. In fact it must be because he had been dreaming of that place that he had dreamed it was Easter. It was also possibly due to Anna's increased recent talk about Christ. She saw that he would die before her, and her desire to save his soul was competing with her tact. She had gone so far as to say, "The Lord promises us an afterlife if we believe."

"He's full of promises," the old man said. "He should run for office."

But the largest influence on his dreams had always been the radio. In the days before Fred had given them a TV, news of the world had come only from the radio at night, reception being so poor by day; and ever since they had built the house in

1978 and begun falling asleep to the BBC, picked up via short-wave, his dreams had often been of world affairs. Anna preferred music but usually the old man won out.

Naturally he had often dreamed of the Middle East, it was so constantly inflamed. At first, as they built the house (and even now the fresh sight of the roofline brought to mind the flash of a young man's hammer in the light) there was Camp David, then the hostage crisis. It was not really so much that the old man dreamed of world affairs, as that the broken places of his dreams, where people from his life appeared altered and disguised, in grotesque company, were known—in the dream way of knowing things—as Beirut, Tehran, etc. But he hadn't dreamed only of the Middle East. He had dreamed of the Falklands/Malvinas; of Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Philippines. He had dreamed many times of apocalyptic Russia.

The Middle East caused him to rail to his wife against "nuts with books." He had always vigorously opposed religion, including her Christianity, even if he only really let her have it once or twice a month. "These are nuts with books who run this place." He was forced to speak the sentence much more slowly than it formed in his head. He lost the name of the place and then after a moment said, "Israel." Then he said, "Palestine."

"Oh look who's the nut with the book"—and it was true, he'd held on his lap, over the blanket, a book called *Righteous Victims*. This was now their public book. It belonged to the library, but he clutched it as if it were his own.

"I've got lots of books, a new one every week." Awful, embarrassing ellipses sometimes fell between his words. "Keeps you from believing too much in any of them."

Anna intended to read to him from the Bible once they had finished with Benny Morris. ("I'm not sure he actually is a Jewish person. It doesn't sound to me like a very Jewish name.")

In the old man's revised opinion it was not so much the Koran, as he'd thought before, that was motivating the Palestinians as "the fact—and it is a fact— that these people are being robbed. Those settlers think God is a real estate agent."

Anna was scandalized. He felt she took the Israeli side as penance for the sort of remarks she had formerly made. Anna had once said, "She's very pretty for a Jewish lady," and he'd replied, "Well, you're damn ignorant, even for a Swede."

He'd never been a bigot anyway, but in Biloxi his best friend had been Irv Kamensky, a Jewish fellow and a pilot. He liked the pleased and cocky way that Irv talked; it had affected how he himself talked ever since.

Irv had visited once with Lorraine. It was about her that the ignorant remark had been made. Lorraine was a city person, remarking, as they walked in the woods, that she was terrified of animals. The old man, not so old then, had mischievously insisted that there were bears and mountain lions all around, and when Lorraine became a afraid, he'd lied and said of course there weren't any at all. He was never happier talking with a woman than when she was the pretty wife of a friend and the friend nearby; he could charm her without consequence or threat, the charm itself its only end, and this was almost his life's ideal: to charm but not to tamper and then go peaceably away.

Irv had marveled at the colors of everything, the difference from one side of the road to another.

"How would you feel," the old man had said, during the latest political dispute with his wife, "if people came to take away our land."

"You used to be a friend to the Jews."

"Your part of the world"—he meant the holy part—"is a wreck. And why is this? People think God is a real estate agent." A good line, but he was repeating it, and unable to deliver it in the rapid smiling Irv Kamensky way. "It's like what *we* did," he said.

"And what was that?" Anna said, but without quite the same old scorn. His weakness had put a damper on their quarrels, which made him angrier still.

"To the Indians!"

"Our son bought this land if you remember." She could speak perfectly quickly, a tall thick handsome old woman with no health problems beyond her cataracts.

"Well, there weren't any holy tanks involved."

"I don't know how you say these things"—an allusion to his being part German.

"I'm not a kraut," he said. "I'm a mutt. Most of the blood in this country—German. Thank Jesus it's mixed up with other stuff."

It annoyed her when he thanked Jesus for something Jesus was obviously not responsible for. This had been going on for forty years. She was not the sort of woman he would naturally have married, but she had been beautiful in a Jean Harlow kind of way; he'd charmed her; and then there came a complication. He sometimes wondered if Fred had noticed that his birthday was not quite nine months after his parents' anniversary. Between themselves he and Anna never spoke of the awkwardness of the dates.

A generation later there would have been a divorce. But they had never discussed the question. Anyway he had always admired her strength, which she prized as a Swedish inheritance. What he didn't like so much was her taste in expensive things, her idolatry of beautiful houses, European cars—even the English royalty! It was vulgar, and it caused the fact that he had never made enough money to press between them like the resistance of two identically charged magnets.

She said: "You talk about Israel—"

"Not Israel! The West Bank!"

She combined a sigh with a snort, a familiar sound. He began telling her things she knew perfectly well—they came from the book she'd just read—and he would have gone on had she not got up to make tea.

She knew just how strong he liked his tea; he'd watched her watch it steep. When the color was exact, she pulled the bag out and wrung it with the string against a spoon. Real kindness had always been mixed-up with her sanctimony, and he'd let his mood give way with a little half-smile and a nod, an expression he had shown her many times before.

But not everything in old age was familiar. Certain things remained a surprise. One of these was the smell of his and Anna's house. The old man had just opened the door, with its telling chime of three wooden balls against strings. He sat on the entryway chair, undoing the Velcro bands of his sneakers. He shut the door. The smell of the house was cool and somehow mineral, with a sort of iron flatness to it. He felt it came from the wet ground on the other side of the basement wall. Not strong at all, it was nevertheless stronger if there were no cooking smells, as there weren't today, in the swept-bare quiet of Sunday.

Immediately he went to the bathroom cabinet for the nail scissors. He paid no attention to his face in the mirror, the little landside on the right side. He had once been handsome, a subject for amateur photographers and sketch-artists: a handsome and well-spoken failure, possibly a vaguely romantic character. But it wasn't out of vanity that he avoided his reflection; it was only that he knew it so well.

He went to the dining room, where he stood at the table and opened the scissors with his left hand. He roughly positioned their blades on either side of the long fingernail that had touched the snake. The scissors fell down, so he set them up again. Now he pressed down on the raised handle and the cut went mostly through the nail. At this point he was able to bite it and rip it off with his teeth.

Long ago, Anna had told him of the Swedish custom of cutting the fingernails of the dead as short as possible. They would keep growing in the grave, along with your hair, and the idea was to delay the ship that came to announce the end of time, because it would be built of dead men's fingernails, its sails woven of human hair. He thought of this myth every time his nails or hair were cut. He figured his own hair wouldn't speed the apocalypse much, he was so nearly bald.

In the living room motes of dust churned with drugged slowness in a patch of light. He sat in the blue velvet chair, its piping frayed, and opened an old anthology called *Man and His Measure*, pages yellow as an old woman's hair. But he didn't read. He only sat still with the book splayed on his lap until his bones began to be sore.

"If the shark cartilage and all that isn't working, I don't see why you don't let me buy you some pot," Fred said one day when the old man was complaining about his arthritis. Thirty years ago the old man had been keenly jealous of Fred's generation that seemed to be changing the world. They appeared for a while as a kind of founding generation, with their drugs and sexual looseness, their way of seeing America and Vietnam as opposite sides to the single coin. The old man had been jealous of them almost to the point of voting for Nixon out of spite. But Fred and Allen's generation had turned out like to be husbands and businessmen like the rest—burghers.

In any case, he himself had made a late happy discovery of marijuana. Had it happened earlier, he might have become an addict. The brownies lessened his arthritic pain and placed it at a once remove; they gloriously retarded and enriched the passage of time; and it was also gratifying to flout the capricious law.

Today for the first time the old man had eaten a brownie on a Sunday, not Tuesday. Anna had baked a batch last night. If she disapproved, it wasn't enough to refuse to bake them.

"They're a great help," he said and he could see that she knew they weren't only that to him.

The drug made him braver. It let him more easily regard the world as a passing spectacle, and consider all possessions superfluous—beyond your five senses, a plot of land, a record-player. A CD-player rather: he and Anna got great pleasure from the CDs. At times they sat listening to Schumann and in the middle of it held hands.

The thought of Anna reminded him that he should leave a note before setting out to climb Horse Mountain. He had decided to do it, then, what had been in the back of his mind all day and seemed almost too momentous a thought to confront directly: to climb up and down Horse Mountain. The old man figured he had at least nine hours of light left. If he had once made it up and down in three hours, six ought to be sufficient today. He felt strong enough, and was eager to be secretly laurelled by a last ascent. He would descend in the mellow light and not even miss dinner.

HE LEFT THE clearing of the yard just after noon. The sun peaked, invisibly pivoted, and began to decline; but the drug had kicked in harder, and the woods added to it their own strangeness, strangeness of all woods.

He was walking through a stand of oak, clones of some straight tall original. No one, not even the grandchildren when they visited, went up the mountain anymore, but the old path was still visible, faint and certain, through the summer growth. And amid the green and gray bark the baneberries, red and white, had the glamour of their color and their poisonousness. When his granddaughter stumbled and fell here once, a twig went up her nose, causing it to bleed, and they'd gone back to the house for some cotton, not making the trip that day.

Shadows of the canopy threshed on the floor of gold and brown; and then eventually the taller, more dignified trees gave way to scrub oak. And then before long the old man came to the path that ran horizontally across the mountain, side by side with a dry irrigation ditch formerly serving a ranch down on Brush Creek. He stopped to catch his breath and swig water from the canteen he carried in his left hand. He was sweating beneath his flannel shirt.

All around him wild rose and tamarack choked the disused ditch. He crossed the ditch by a tipping footbridge, and in twenty feet had come to the old cabin built by a friend of Fred's in the seventies. The fellow had been a hippie like other young people then, a lanky Ichabod Crane of a character who practiced yoga and played the piano. What had impressed the old man was that he apparently intended to live without a woman. One day the old man had assisted four other men in carrying an upright piano to the tiny octagonal cabin where, to this day, it covered one wall.

He pushed open the creaky door. The same as ten years ago: mouse-droppings and a few rusted Campbell's soup cans; bottles of colored glass on the narrow sills; a weather-stained mattress stripped to the ticking. An eternal teenage predilection for vandalism had led a few high school kids, he presumed, to break half the windows—a good thing, actually, making for clean air instead of suffocation.

Some of the keys elicited a soured forlorn sound. When they'd set the piano down, champagne was brought out and the tall fellow, whose name the old man had known perfectly well—they had been friends and he'd come down for dinner at times—had played songs which the young men all knew. No one had remembered to bring a flashlight, so they'd had to wait on the moon before heading back down the mountain.

The Ichabod Crane character had long ago moved to Colorado Springs. Apparently he programmed computers there and had married. In fact he had come to the old man's seventieth birthday party and relayed this news; it was as if he had come and gone without leaving his name.

There were still books in the cabin's bookshelf. He took down one called *Seed*, full of what even the old man recognized as psychedelic designs and lettering. In it were also pages of square photographs in groups of four: telephone wires, Mayan temples, something the old man could not make out, a Hindu deity of some sort.

In another set: people bathing, the Buddha, wolves in a forest, Robert Kennedy shot. Looking again at the indecipherable frame the old man discovered with horror that it was a row of corpses. They looked freshly disinterred.

In *Righteous Victims* he had learned that in the fifties an Israeli commander had led a massacre at an Arab village whose name began with Q; and now this man was prime minister of the country. To think that at one point the hippies had seemed to augur a new era of peace . . . . At least the old man, trained as a bombardier, had not seen any action in his war. He was enduringly glad to have gone up and come down in those huge loud planes without disturbing a hair on anyone's head, and now to be able to die without leaving behind any body but his own.

Behind the cabin, tarpaper had fallen from the roof like pages from a black book. The old man made his way through the bit of sage that quickly gave way to more trees. Now the mountain grew much steeper, and he had to keep his wits in order to distinguish the old trail from deer tracks that might lead him astray.

Every so often he stopped for breath and sipped water, but he refused to turn around, wanting to take in the view all at once.

He walked with his left leg ahead, often pushing off his right, so that it was like a tedious form of galloping. But he felt fine, sure of making it, and confident of having chosen the right day—bright even beneath the dark trees, in the needle-filtered shade. He'd found a single Calypso orchid, its red spoonlike mouth lunging and nodding in the general stillness. Possibly a squirrel had disturbed it in its flight from mankind.

The drug slowed down time, and so did the light labor of climbing. The day became a kind of summit of time; the solstice was not far past. And yet after some time he gained the ridge. In spite of the care he had taken the water was all but gone. He turned around and looked at the narrow fan of Salt Creek valley as on its south side it widened and declined from red sandstone to dun-colored gypsum spotted with sage.

The little valley had finally been settled by rich men instead of hippies. Far away he could see a figure riding a horse in a ring. The Valezes had left, their junk cars been removed, and what replaced their disorderly life was a boxy sort of palace with huge flashing windows. Soon the old man's own house would be encircled; only through Fred were he and Anna able to pay their property taxes. And he himself, a bit of local color, had already vanished from the catered house-warming parties where he'd smiled at and despised his hosts and from the corner of his eye seen Anna admiring expensive things. Tribal blankets were hung on dry-walled banisters beside elk-horn chandeliers.

"This is a wonderful local man," he had heard Mrs. McCready explain to a guest, pointing to the photograph of him on her wall. "He's from up the road and he may be—yes, he is still here, over by the hors d'oeuvres? I'll introduce you." And she'd called out his name. That was before the latest stroke.

Clouds had come in overhead, the mountain weather as changeable as ever. It looked and smelled as if it would rain, and the old man put out the crippled hand to test the air.

A few drops pitted the dirt. There was still a bit of climbing to do before he would reach the other side of the mountain and come upon the view of spreading Brush Creek. Salt Creek had cut such a narrow valley that for two weeks every winter Horse Mountain blocked the sun and no direct sunlight fell through their windows; but Brush Creek was another story, a wide gentle valley, the little line of water almost lost in the middle of its ancient course, such a promising green sight that you thought of Mount Pisgah in the Bible and invariably caught your breath or sighed.

He was already proud of his excursion, and when he walked back in the front door and Anna said, "Didn't it rain?" he would shrug off the question. The storm was bound to be short, the usual summer afternoon thing.

But the rain had begun in earnest. The crenellations of Castle Peak were no longer visible, and lightning dangled from nearby violent clouds. And then as if a sluice had been opened, there was suddenly more rain. A ferocious rending thunderclap caused the old man to flinch, and before long he was wet and cold.

He was walking through the rain without much difficulty, going somewhat downhill, when he stumbled. Pain shot through his left ankle but he didn't fall or cry out; he simply sat down in the wet dirt. He was surprised not to have made a sound, and with an odd calm lucidity, known to him from other desperate moments, he wondered whether he might die of exposure before he was found. He flung the canteen away as if it were hope itself. At least he would not die at someone else's hand; instead he would die as anyone should, alone on land he considered his own. That was in fact as good a title to the land as any he could imagine, unless to die defending it would be better.

The rain was already thinning out, but the old man's clothes were almost soaked through and he was shivering. There was no question of standing up when even to touch his ankle nearly caused him to yelp. On his hands and knees he moved into the poor shelter of a tall fir. But even this much motion made it apparent that he needn't resign himself yet: surely it was as possible to crawl down a mountain as to walk. The cost to his dignity made him immediately angry at

Anna, who would call him a fool when—or if—he showed up at the door like an abandoned dog.

He sat down to wait out the storm, his features tight with resentment; she had insisted on witnessing his failures. If ever her car broke down or some piece of clothing was damaged in the wash she complained in a tone which implicated him in the disappointment. Maybe a husband's role was to protect; but he couldn't protect her from everything. Yet it was also true that she didn't need to utter a word, if something broke or faltered, and still he felt guilty. Perhaps, then, the notion that there was no instance of her unhappiness in which he was purely innocent was his idea, not hers. He was confused, and the pain in his ankle impeded his reasoning. Perhaps it was Anna's stoicism itself that galled him—the virtuous sufferer, the righteous victim.

Their past had become too disintegrated in his mind to make sense of. He could not illustrate his ideas with memories. No doubt the marijuana only made it worse. The old man did not know what to say to himself about his life but that it had brought him here: into the shade, bedded with soft needles, of a fir tree whose scent had been brought out by rain.

He didn't want to lie to Anna, if he made it back down, about having had a last look at Brush Creek, and it would be a humiliation to say that he had sprained (unless he had broken) his ankle not forty feet from the prospect. He knew the rock, the vantage, well—a chunk of granite speckled with rust-colored lichen and glinting with mica in the sun.

Seated as he was, the old man could feel against his thigh the pressure of the nail scissors in his pocket. He had meant to return them to the medicine cabinet, and the discovery that he had not was like a lost word coming back to him just as the sentence he was in the middle of speaking required it. With his left hand he unbuttoned his flannel shirt, pulled it off, and then produced the scissors. Before long he had cut the shirt in two and tied the strips of fabric around his knees. He thrilled with pride as he crawled out from under the tree into the violet light that had followed the storm. Cold drops of rain fell from the tree onto his bare back.

The pain in his ankle was so regular now that he could almost ignore it, and on his hands and knees he proceeded across the muddy ground to the look-out rock. He crawled like this until he knelt beside the rock, and looked out over Brush Creek:

Beams of sun dropped fanwise through the clouds, a car slipped along the paved road, there were horses in a pen, houses planted on their lots, barns, machines, propane tanks and trees scattered in the awesome casualness of their existence and surrounded by fields of alfalfa lit brightly as if it were corn. Always at dusk green things seemed to glow almost to the point of phosphorescence—a limit of brilliance before the light slipped and let go.

So he had come and seen it then. The old man told himself as much, let his head fall and turned to go. He slid the flannel back into place and crawled off, wondering what condition his hands would be in by the time he got home.

HE MADE HIS way down the side of Horse Mountain on his knees, and as he did so the marijuana's effect seemed to decline in time with the light; and for all the pain in his ankle, the crick in his neck, his considerable thirst, and the abrasion of his palms, the old man felt as if he were being lowered very gently on a pallet to the ground. He saw a white butterfly flit before his lowered eyes like a scrap torn from the universal album. Thirty feet above him a rinsing wind spilled from the tops of the trees.

"You talk about these places," Anna said, meaning Israel and Palestine, "because you're afraid of your heart." She had told him this a thousand times, that he substituted politics for introspection—not that she used those terms. But he understood himself well enough to know that his heart had become an artifact of Salt Creek. "The land was ours before we were the land's" someone had said, but that was backwards; and it was this awareness—that the land claimed you before you could claim it—that encouraged him to side with the dispossessed.

He descended farther, and in the failing light the pale color of the sage and the aspen seemed to lift and float like transparencies as the dark land sank away. It appalled him that the beauty of their life here had so much exceeded the happiness of it, and he regretted afresh the quarrels he'd provoked. He would like to crawl down Horse Mountain free of the thought of Indians and Palestinians killed and expelled; of the scandalous worldwide apportionment of money and land; and of the nullity of God and His Son. He didn't know why he had always cared so much about politics when here in the very middle of America, at the high still center of the world, he no more took part in foreign struggles than as a corpse he would play the harp in heaven. Absurd that he had never left the country once, but had fought with people, including Anna, over El Salvador and Nicaragua! In those days too the issue was land—she thought it was Communism—but he had not helped a peasant to a square foot of it.

Yet not to have thought of politics would have made him feel desolate and strangely afraid, as if he stood on a sort of empty plain with nothing in sight and lacking a means of contact with the world.

The old man's hand slipped in the dirt, and his torso fell forward, his chin nicked by a rock. When he raised himself back up, he touched his index finger to his jaw. It came away bearing a bead of red blood.

Crawling, shirtless, bleeding, the strips of flannel around his knees—he would make quite a sight down below. Anna might refuse to bake the brownies anymore, or Fred get wind of his adventure and insist they move to town. He might order the old man to be looked after. Which the old man would naturally refuse.

An hour or more had passed before he saw the cabin he had visited so long ago. A spasm of relief went through him. He hadn't realized it was so close. Thinking of survival, he'd hardly thought at all and the time had poured past blank enormous volumes at a soundless awful speed.

The mountains were reduced to silhouettes when the old man crawled past the old structure. Probably a few stars would be out before he made it to the lawn that would feel so soft to his damaged palms. It might be some time before he could hold anything again; as always, it might be never.

One arm sturdy, the other rather iffy, he hurried as well as he was able down the path through the oaks, breathing savagely hard and stopping only to adjust his knee-pads. He reminded himself, as he crawled and grunted, to be careful of his heart.

His heart beat suddenly harder when he saw through the trees the flashing red lights of an ambulance or police cruiser. He could not see the vehicle itself, but over on the opposite bank the undersides of the leaves were caught in lurid shifting light.

At once he realized that he had no recollection of actually leaving a note on the table, only of his intention to do so. The great errors of his life had all been inadvertencies: he and Anna had neglected to use protection; he had once failed to insure a car which he'd then crashed into another car, putting them deep into debt and forcing them to sell the house which he had just built; and now he had forgotten to write a simple note. Anna must have panicked and called the police—unless his unexplained absence had caused such a shock that she'd suffered a heart attack, and the ambulance had come for her. At the idea that he had done her in the old man felt his eyes water, and when he finally reached the lawn he was not only bare to the waist, crawling, bleeding a little, and panting very hard, but prepared to cry tears of remorse. His back was filmed with sweat, as cold as if gasoline were evaporating off his skin.

A light had been left on in the dining room—which meant nothing one way or the other. He emitted strange sounds as he crawled as quickly as possible—it wasn't very quickly—through the lawn; onto his stone path; up the steps to the deck; and across the deck to the door of their house. The flannel had slipped to his ankles and knees were raw. With his weaker hand he slapped the front door.

He believed he heard Anna's voice. At the low, lovely sound of it the old man gave way altogether and slumped against the front door. When it opened his upper body fell into the house with such a sensation of triumph that it seemed he had broken through victory tape.

"Oh my Lord!" Anna said. "Henry, what happened to you? I was worried sick about you. Henry!"

She was using his name, an unaccountable surprise.

The police officer put his hands under the old man's armpits and raised him up, placing such weight on his sore ankle that for the first time he howled—unless it was that you only howled in the presence of others. Then the policeman slung him into his arms like a bride and carried him into the living room, where he set the old man down with no grace on the impossibly familiar floral-patterned fabric.

The young police officer, bland and tall, stood looking at the old man in confusion, as if this were an eventuality his training had not prepared him for. Anna had run out of the room and now she returned with a glass of water and a blanket to cover him. She wrapped him tight in the coarse wool thing while he shivered.

"How do you feel, sir?" the policeman said. "Do you know where you are?"

He almost laughed at this. Instead he nodded his head. He was going to say that his ankle might be broken—but he did not want to be removed from here tonight.

"But where did you go!" Anna asked.

"Horse Mountain." He could not bring himself to say why he'd gone, and couldn't tell her, his tears having stopped, how glad he was that she was alive.

"Horse Mountain!" Anna said as if it were the name of the moon.

The old man sat with the policeman—he offered the fellow a wry smile—while Anna called a neighbor. A few minutes later he was being carried on the blanket by Mike Olson and the policeman. Mike Olson was a rich man from across the road. No one was speaking now, as perhaps no one was sure what he was in the presence of. The old man was being carried to Anna's car. Once the two of them were alone together, on the way to the hospital over the dark roads, he would have to explain himself in words that would be broken, slow, inadequate, some missing. As he passed on his back beneath the strewn, keen, far, throbbing stars—shut out for a moment by the covered bridge, then emerging again on the vault of blue black sky marbled with a few high cirrus clouds—the old man reveled while he could in the day's unspecifiable plenitude of meaning, which even the first word would violate. He would like to place the fullness of what he'd understood in the palm of Anna's hand, to hand it to her like an object with the silence and integrity of a small smooth stone from the creek. There might be the contents of a quarrel there, but none of the spirit of one—as if he'd known during his life how to separate the two. +

RAPHAEL'S SCHOOL OF BEAUTY CULTURE INC.
3035
ALL HAIR STYLES
½ PRICE
TUESDAY
OVER 10.00

School of Raphael. Erin Kasimow, ©2004

EGGERS, TEEN IDOL; or, The Education of Gary Baum

Keith Gessen

As the editor of a controversial literary website, Gary Baum used to receive many strange emails, often from people who were conceptual email artists, and sometimes he didn't know quite what to do with them. "I remember the first time Zadie Smith emailed me," he told me when I visited him in California the month before his high school graduation. "I didn't believe it was her. I was like, 'Okay, bye.' Finally she wrote me an email—she had a Hotmail account!—where she took all the people on the acknowledgments page of her book and explained how she knew every one of them. Then she was like, '*Now* do you believe me?'" Having established her credentials, Smith was able to inform Gary that the rumors he was trying to generate on his website, of her liaison with Dave Eggers, were not based in fact. "The ultimate literary hook-up," is what Gary had called the alleged affair.

Zadie Smith was not the first person to find herself annoyed with Gary's antics. In another time, the offended parties would likely have been limited to the principal of Calabasas High School, for whom Gary's newspaper work was a constant thorn in the side, and possibly the local PTA. But in our technological age, a funny thing happened to Gary Baum: in addition to his duties as a young adult—editing the *Calabasas Courier*, filling out college applications, scrutinizing *Dawson's Creek*—for two years he took the fight to New York literary culture. During that time he produced, on his website, a remarkable document about the rise to prominence of writer and editor Dave Eggers. While doing so he irritated a wide range of people—"I can't believe," one writer told me after being quoted on Gary's site with a superfluous [*sic*] attached, "that he *sic*ed me!"—and made life less comfortable for the ostensible object of his affection. He also learned more than anyone ought to know about the way things work.

What follows touches upon many things—Eggers's career, literary nepotism, digitized postmodernity, and the media tsunami in which Eggers himself became engulfed and whose abrasive spray Gary felt against his face. But it is above all the story of Gary's education.

Gary first discovered Eggers in 1998, when he picked up *Shiny Adidas Track Suits and the Death of Camp*, an anthology of essays from the San Francisco magazine *Might*. Eggers, one of *Might*'s founders, was the motive force of the anthology, whose tone was a compelling mixture of a highly allusive, even immersive comfort with popular culture and an imperious animosity toward same. Politically leftish but uncommitted, casually erudite, angry in an ill-defined way, it was just the thing a teenager could use. It had an essay on MTV news anchor Kurt Loder ("The Old Man and MTV") that suggested MTV was stupid but Loder was only pretending to be. It had an essay explaining why black people were cooler than white people. The title essay was an attack on the aesthetic of "camp" delivered in a mock-academic tone that could perhaps best be described as "campy." Eggers's own contribution, "Never Fucked Anyone," was typical: preachy, sarcastic, written in a humorous, high-velocity prose, it made an earnest plea against the use of the word *fucking* to describe sex. If it was impossible to discern an overarching idea from the anthology, or even a consistent attitude, it was clear that *Might* had a problem with the way things were—or, at the very least, with where they were in the way things were.

Death of Camp was a tombstone for *Might*, whose editors had run out of money, closed up shop, and moved East a year earlier (Eggers became editor-at-large for *Esquire*). It also heralded things to come: Eggers's bio indicated, semi-jocularly, that he might be preparing to launch a Web-based publication. He did much more. A few months after discovering *Might*, Gary held in his hands the first issue of Eggers's next venture, *McSweeney's*, a thick, beautiful literary quarterly with a mixed cast of famous writers (David Foster Wallace, Rick Moody) and as-yet-unknowns. The look and feel of *McSweeney's* were like nothing anyone had seen since the 1890s—instead of a quarterly's habitual neo-Impressionist cover, *McSweeney's* was nobly black-and-white and designed exclusively with text elements. The front matter was a parody of front matter, at one point including a request that all submissions be accompanied by college transcripts and peer recommendations. But *McSweeney's* was hardly a parody, as the stories and essays and interviews were for the most part very accomplished and, even more impressively, were given ample space. Several of the pieces in the first few issues exceeded 20,000 words—an unheard-of length for a modern magazine. *McSweeney's* represented the arrival of a long-awaited sensibility, or simply a generation—it effortlessly inhabited a certain kind of experimental writing, as if this were how its writers most naturally expressed themselves. The magazine also had a web cousin, at www.McSweeneys.net, which published shorter humorous pieces, including, early on, a send-up of *Es-*

quire, barely disguised as "Man: The Magazine for Men." Gary loved it. "This was my own personal thing," he told me in Calabasas. "No one knew about this guy. It was something I had found, like you would find a cool band. And then all this stuff started coming out."

"All this stuff" was related to the publication, in February of 2000, of Eggers's memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The memoir relates that in 1991, when Eggers was twenty-one, his parents died of cancer within weeks of each other. Soon thereafter Eggers and his eight-year-old brother Christopher lit out for San Francisco, where Eggers lived a young adult's fantasy-nightmare, raising his little brother while placing himself at the heart of that city's late-millennial golden age. The story is compelling, Eggers's style even more so, but for a first book the pre-publication hype was extraordinary. A portion of the book appeared, in October of 1999, in the *New Yorker* (as did a photo spread of the *McSweeney's* staff), and previews popped up in *Shift*, *Spin*, *New York*, and *Vanity Fair*. Nor was it merely a push from the publisher: Eggers had received a solid but unstaggering $100,000 advance from Simon & Schuster (a sum he discusses in the preface to the book), suggesting that the marketing department would not be painting highway billboards for *A Heartbreaking Work*. The hype seemed to generate itself, as though from a magic hype-machine.

This was interesting, and for Gary, who knew a thing or two about Eggers, it was especially so. When the *New York Observer* published a list of all the magazines in which Eggers had appeared before his book was even available, Gary's suspicions were confirmed: the memoirist had friends. One was a senior writer at *Spin*; another had until recently worked at the *New Yorker*. So Gary did the professional cynics one better, compiling an article for his website called, "A Heartbreaking Work Of Staggering Genius: Revised." It opened with Gary's signature urbanity:

> Gabriel Snyder, the new writer of the *New York Observer*'s famous "Off the Record" media industry column, has been doing a pretty good job since the writer's predecessor, Carl Swanson, left in January for *New York* magazine. A good example of Snyder's work was an article-by-article dissection of the media buzz surrounding Dave Eggers in the February 21st issue of the *Observer*. Eggers is the editor of *McSweeney's* and the author of one of the hottest memoirs on the market at the moment, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. He is also one of my favorite writers.

That last line was the odd note, for what followed amounted to a damaging exposé. Gary had annotated the *Observer* article, using numbered footnotes (1 through 9) and then lettered footnotes to those footnotes (*a* through *j*) in which he traced, via Web searches and his handy *Might* anthology, all the connections Eggers had at his disposal. "I was surprised," Gary told me. "I didn't know anything about it. I was like: this works, and this works." Everyone with a link to the memoirist was labeled a *Friend of Eggers*, or *FoE!*—the exclamation point possibly indicating Gary's shock as he discovered friend upon friend upon friend.

That first article was truly the work of a paranoid mind abetted by Google—nothing existed that was not linked to something else. A few of the connections, like Eggers's several points of contact with the impregnable *New Yorker*, were revealing. Others were more oblique: "Kurt Andersen, the media superstar that used to be the editor of *New York* and is now one of the founders of Powerful Media," Gary wrote in footnote 4, attempting to explain why Eggers was profiled in *New York* magazine, "employs *FoE!* Todd Pruzan, the deputy editor of *McSweeney's*." This comment indicated that its author, for all his copious insider-type knowledge, was working from the outside—the tenuous Andersen-Pruzan-Eggers connection was unlikely to spur antitrust legislation. And there were other indications, too, that Gary was not from around here: he initially smashed through the knotty U-Chicago vs. MLA dilemma over polysyllabic proper-noun possessives ending in *s* by writing of "Egger's" book, and then referred knowingly to *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani as "he."

Gary had been writing essays on popular culture for several Web publications, and posting others on his website (www.aphrodigitaliac.com), for some time, but no one had really noticed. Now, some larger sites read by people in the New York publishing world linked to Gary's, and his article was circulated via email. One editor contacted Gary directly. "He said I'd caught onto something in the zeitgeist," Gary recalled. "I was like, 'I just did this one thing.' But he said, 'No, you need to go with this. Trust me. You've been writing all these articles about pop culture—this is what you've been looking for.'"

And so the *FoE! Log* was born. "Armed with an array of new sources which reach far into the deepest corridors of Egger's inner circle," Gary announced at the beginning of *Log #2*, in the breathless, hyperbolic, metaphor-mixing, slightly condescending, and above all unstable tone that would always characterize the *Log*, "this space will bring you an unprecedented array of news, views, and shameless gossip about everyone's favorite poster boy for the postmodernist set." Thereafter, approximately every two weeks, for forty editions averaging 2,500 words and including links to many thousands more, Gary, often reluctantly, sometimes sporadically, but always with dogged commitment, traced the rise of the unstoppable Eggers.

Throughout the *Log*, Gary was wry and skeptical—of Eggers (a sellout?), of Eggers's fans (mere hipsters!), and even of himself (a shameless publicity-seeker?). But he was also adoring, silly, and naive. Reading the *Log* you could watch Gary grow wise in the ways of the world without, somehow, growing cynical; you could see his increasing confidence and erudition, as well as his continuing troubles—thirty editions after his Kakutani gaffe, Gary referred to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s main book man, Carlin Romano, as "she." In *Log #9* he decided that the correct possessive for a noun like Eggers is "Eggers's," but warned, "In the interest of continuity, I will continue to use abominable punctuation."

Countless journalists besides Gary had essayed Eggers's tale, mostly in accounts that managed to praise Eggers's zaniness while questioning his authenticity. Eggers's friend and major *McSweeney's* contributor Neal Pollack wrote a number of parodies of Eggers's stardom, and the *McSweeney's* style spawned countless imitators, including the designers of IBM's Annual Report, a web-based "performance piece"/homage (at www.mcsweeneys.org), and a Nike advertising campaign. Gary's *Log* was generally slighted in this august field—parodied by Pollack, referred to backhandedly as a "fanzine" by mainstream journalists. In fact the *Log* was far more than that. Devoted to tracing the Eggers phenomenon, it became a phenomenon; its central contradiction—an undisguised affection for Eggers coupled with an unrelenting and often highly critical scrutiny of his every move, made Gary the perfect fan for a writer whose subject was public, agonized, self-incriminating and self-exculpating self-examination. It was, as Gary would title one of the *Log*s, "Muckraking At Its Postmodern-ist"—exposure without the conclusions. Thousands of fan sites litter the Internet—Britney Spears has so many that there is a Top 50 list to help guide the novice Spears admirer—but only Gary's *Log* is both a literary document and a sign of the times.

THE BEST PART of the *Log* may well be its makeshift table of contents, some of whose headings tell the story in brief:

2/21/00 **FoE! Log #1: A Heartbreaking Work Of Staggering Genius: Revised**
Noting the rise of Dave Eggers's literary star.
3/13/00 **FoE! Log #3: Yet More Eggersiana**
Annotations without a starting-off point — shocking!
3/20/00 **FoE! Log #4: Muckraking At Its Postmodern-ist**
Better than ever!
4/17/00 **FoE! Log #6: The Beth Eggers Exclusive (And Some Other Stuff)**
Quality? Yes. Quantity? Not really.

> 5/1/00 **FoE! Log #8: The Dave Eggers Backlash Is So "Five Minutes Ago"**
> Is he doomed to be a short-lived relic of pop culture commentary?
> 6/19/00 **FoE! Log #11: "Hmmm . . . Gary Baum, The Next Dave Eggers?"**
> The last postmodernist gambit I've got left.
> 7/31/00 **FoE! Log #13: A Very Special Edition Of The FoE! Log**
> Eggers talks. Baum talks back.
> 9/4/00 **FoE! Log #18: Eggers Is Everywhere**
> Mr. Sensitive Novelist Guy meets Mr. Open-Minded.
> 9/18/00 **FoE!: Log #20: Dave And Vendela, Sitting In A Tree**
> Eggers in love.
> 2/26/01 **FoE! Log #29: He's Mad As Hell And He's Not Going To Take It Anymore**
> Will he follow in the footsteps of Salinger or Roth?
> 5/14/01 **FoE! Log #35: McSweeney's Quietly Sells Out**
> Scraping the bottom of the week's literary news barrel.

And here is a sample entry, from *Log #7*:

> [**7.b**] On page 73 of the May 1st edition of *Newsweek* (with Elian [Gonzalez] on the cover) there is a short article about Zadie Smith, the half-white/half-Jamaican publishing phenom from Britain whose first novel, "White Teeth," is currently the talk of London. Smith inspires much of the same speculation/adulation/intrigue as Eggers does here in the States . . . But most importantly she seems to, with the help of Eggers, be starting a new author trend [**4.g**] among rising literary stars: The Self-Effacing Self-Review Of One's First Book. *Newsweek* explains that "Smith reviewed her own novel for a literary magazine, and mocked her own giddy precociousness: '*White Teeth* is the literary equivalent of a hyperactive, ginger-haired tap-dancing ten-year-old.'" Eggers pulled the same stunt [3] a few months ago in *Spin* with the help of long-time *FoE!* Dave Moodie (who is an editor of the magazine) [**4.p**].

The first link is to the *Newsweek* article, the second [4.g] to *Log #4*'s item on a *New York Times* article describing the new "trend" among writers of mentioning one's pets. The third [3] links to footnote 3 in the very first *Log*, describing Eggers's self-review in *Spin*; and [4.p] takes the reader to the 16th footnote in *Log #4*, where Eggers's relationship with Moodie is revealed in detail. One could theoretically get lost in the *Log* forever, wandering from link to link to link.

Gary's conversation, too, was a collection of links. He was like a man stranded on a desert island to which the Postal Service still delivered magazines. He would begin to speak, then interrupt himself: "Did you see the piece in the *Observer*? No?" Anger, disappointment: he thought he could trust you. When I arrived in Calabasas, Gary handed me a stack of his old articles, some of his fiction, and two things written by others: an article about Calabasas from the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, and a profile of *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter, for my edification. This is something about which the guardians of public morals never warned us—we knew that high school kids were online stealing our credit card numbers and downloading pictures of naked women, but who ever thought they'd be reading the *New York Observer*?

Some of it, of course, was just words on paper. While I was in California, Robert Blake's wife was shot to death outside a restaurant in Studio City, and at night in my hotel, after a day-full of Gary, I watched as Fox News maintained a vigil on the scene. Having no idea, I finally asked Gary who Robert Blake was. "You remember that show," he answered immediately, "*Baretta*?" No, I said, I didn't. "Me neither," he admitted—though, oddly enough, Eggers mentions *Baretta* in the memoir.

Similar lacunae often plague the *Log*, whose 1,000 or so core readers, according to Gary's estimate, were 25- to 35-year-old hypereducated media or publishing or academic professionals ("like you," he added helpfully). They invariably made references that were not in Gary's repertoire. "Just today," he told me the first time I called to say I was writing an article, "I didn't know what the word *acolyte* meant. I had to look it up. This is a common situation here." Another time, as we looked for a parking spot outside Jerry's Famous Deli, an L.A.-area chain chiefly famous for having declared its flagship store "famous" when it opened in the 1970s, Gary got at the root of the problem: "I don't know enough about postmodernism, I've decided."

Gary's keen sense of his own literary limits was one reason the *Log* remained tantalizingly agnostic on some of its major questions. "I'd rather take somebody else's response," he explained, and, always making sure to choose a representative comment, post that on the *Log*. At the same time, Gary had no doubt that what Eggers was doing was special. In some of his non-*Log* writing, the mark of Eggers was profound—especially the strain of world-conquering superconfidence. "[N]o one can stop us," Eggers writes in the memoir, in the very first scene after his parents die and he and his brother Toph are hurtling down California's Highway 1.

> He is mine and you cannot stop me, cannot stop us. Try to stop us, you pussy! You can't stop us from singing, and you can't stop us from making fart sounds, from putting our hands out the window to test the aerodynamics of

> different hand formations, from wiping the contents of our noses under the front of our seats. You cannot stop me from having Toph, who is eight, steer, on a straightaway, while I take off my sweatshirt because suddenly it's gotten really fucking hot . . . . It's unfair. The matchups, Us vs. Them (or you) are unfair. We are dangerous. We are daring and immortal. Fog whips up from under the cliffs and billows over the highway. Blue breaks from beyond the fog and sun suddenly screams from the blue.

Gary often struck the same note. In a short review of *Almost Famous* for the *Calabasas Courier*, he wrote that the movie "captured what it is like to be right there, at sixteen, when the future is laid out in front of you and the world is at your feet"—which was a little odd, coming from Gary, who was a nice kid, a witty and very talented kid, but not a super-duper-popular kid. Calabasas High School was not an easy place to be super-popular; it wasn't even an easy place to find a parking spot. Gary was well known for his muckraking articles in the *Courier*, but he was not a member of the school's social elite. Unlike most of his classmates, who seemed to have had the markers of adolescence blasted from their faces by some sort of nuclear device, Gary's jaw and forehead were still marked with quiet but persistent acne; he was also physically slight, and a little awkward in the angular way of skinny teenagers.

Yet something about Eggers, a writer for the literary *beau monde*, spoke to him. At a time when the MFA track had replaced bohemia as the dominant writerly lifestyle, Eggers was doing wonders for the notion of a young, ass-kicking literary community. His readings, which were packed by hundreds, were conceptually interesting performances—he had jugglers, and guitar smashing, and sometimes he asked someone to sit up front and maintain eye contact with the audience, because he was bad at it. He had good taste as an editor and brilliant taste as a designer, and in the wake of the memoir's stellar sales he founded the McSweeney's independent press. He also had a knack for creating community, as when, while doing a weekly comic strip for the *SF Weekly*, he began leaving the strip's original artwork for people to take from the open trunk of his chartreuse 1972 BMW, along with a guest register for them to sign. "This is not some guy that did this fifty years ago," said Gary. "He's doing it now. I don't have to be well-read to realize that."

Despite this admiration, the *Log*'s primary organizing model remained the conspiracy. And you can see immediately how Calabasas, California, home base of the *FoE! Log*, would predispose one in that direction. It is an affluent, very Jewish town at the edge of the beautiful San Fernando Valley, about forty minutes northwest of Los Angeles. Full of gated communities and pretty pink Mediterranean houses, surrounded by the brown-and-green foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains, it's a cars-only place—there is nowhere to walk and no way to walk there. Gary's best friend, who didn't have a car throughout high school, visited the Baums for the first time in my presence. Calabasas manages to be culturally isolated—the mountains turn L.A.'s two NPR stations into mush as soon as you descend from Highway 101—without being culturally distinct: though it seceded from Los Angeles in 1991 (largely to keep developers in check), the city hall, where Gary works part-time after school, is transparently a former office building in a current office park, with two stories of mirrored, corporate glass.

Calabasas, then, is all subtext, and it reads: *You are being fooled; there is more, much more; there are secrets, there are plots.* And Gary, keeping watch from here, saw plots being hatched across the continent. The *Log* is a lengthy tapestry, with some threads (like that of Eggers "selling out") continuing throughout all 40 editions, others emerging and receding and stopping short, but the thrust of the *Log* is always the same, to piece together and understand. To read the *Log* in its entirety—it runs to about 350 printed pages—is to witness Gary's steady initiation into secrets of the magazine world. Wide-eyed, in *Log #4* he noted that Eggers's younger brother, Christopher, had been featured as the month's "Email This Boy" a year earlier in the teen-girl magazine *Twist*; young Eggers then reprinted many of the emails he received from smitten girls, first in his own high school zine (he is Gary's age), and then on the *McSweeney's* website. The precocious cruelty of the thing did not concern Gary, but the mechanics did. "One might wonder," he began, "how Chris was picked to be the featured boy in *Twist*, as opposed to the throng of others who did not make the final cut."

> Well, a possible answer lies in a *Feed* magazine [i] continuing feature known as "BottomFEEDer." One piece in the series detailed the work of Melanie Mannarino, the 'Guys Editor' at *Seventeen*. Mannarino, at the time of the interview 27-years-old (which would have put her in the same age group as the elder Eggers) described how she finds "real boys" for her magazine's "Guy of the Month" feature. She said that to find the Guy of the Month "we started by asking staffers, 'Do you know any teenage boys?'" . . . Mannarino seemed to indicate that she, along with those in similar jobs, rely on their network of friends, family, and colleagues to find her Guy of the Month. So maybe the *Twist* employee was, like Mannarino, a little desperate to find an appropriate boy for that month's issue. And maybe that *FoE!* employee called on Dave to see if he/she could use the memoirist's younger brother, Chris, as an "E-mail this Boy"

> subject. And, most likely, Chris was all too happy to oblige, as he knew that it would provide perfect fodder for his zine.

This is almost awe-inspiring. Note the Baum method: a deft lateral move (from *Feed* to *Seventeen* to *Twist*) combined with irrelevant innuendo (Mannarino's age=Eggers's age), an ostentatious suspension of judgment where the facts are unknown (the *Twist* employee is referred to as "he/she," this scrupulousness lending weight to Gary's more fantastic assumptions), and finally a projection of startling foresight onto his subjects—what Richard Hofstadter, in his famous essay on the "paranoid style," called the "curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events," in this case the notion that Chris only agreed to appear in *Twist* so he could receive publishable emails. And all of this massive effort, finally, to uncover a rather obvious chain of events—had anyone really thought that *Twist* conducted a scientific, nationwide search for each month's "Email This Boy"? But this was the nature of Gary's education, via the *Log*, and in his mind it all added up to form a massive plot.

Perhaps, too, Gary was forced to stretch the bounds of logic because he would explain the inexplicable. For no one could have predicted the Eggers boom, and in those first weeks and months of Eggers's rise to stardom, there was much befuddled shaking of culture-watching heads. "He has become famous overnight," public radio talk show host Christopher Lydon said by way of introduction. "He is the new new new thing." The *New York Observer*, in the article that launched the *Log*, put the matter even more mystically: "Every so often, a literary media star is born. In the early 90's, it happened to novelist Donna Tartt, and later in the decade it happened to memoirist Elizabeth Wurtzel. Now it is happening to Dave Eggers." Success, in this formulation, is something that "happens" to a writer, without warning, possibly without cause. In Lydon's case, there was an air of reproach—why hadn't anyone predicted it? Didn't we have a guy at Goldman Sachs working on this very problem? Why had we not been warned?

C. Wright Mills once wrote, ominously, that the world of celebrity "has not been built from below by a slow and steady linking of local societies and metropolitan 400s. It has been created from above." But Eggers was different: he was neither imposed nor chosen. Instead he brought to his book's publication a pre-existing readership. *Might* had achieved a certain cult status, especially after its martyrdom to market forces; Eggers had done a few segments for the popular radio program *This American Life*; and *McSweeney's* (whose fourth issue appeared shortly after the memoir) and its website had already begun to shake the literary firmament. Eggers "crossed over" due to a Web-aided linking of local societies; there may have been a cabal promoting him, as Gary insisted, but they were junior editors, not CEOs, and they were fans of Eggers's previous work, not necessarily his personal friends.

AND WERE WE right, we junior editors, we not-quite-personal friends? I reviewed Eggers's book when it first came out and was struck, as everyone was, by how representative his sensibility, and his prose style, seemed to be. The memoir is, for example, unsparing in its physical descriptions of his mother's cancer, but in a peculiar way. "They took out my mother's stomach six months ago," he writes. "Then they tied the [something] to the [something], hoped that they had removed the offending portion, and set her on a schedule of chemotherapy. But of course they didn't get it all. They had left some of it and it had grown, it had come back, it had laid eggs, was stowed away, was stuck to the side of the spaceship." Eggers knows that cancer doesn't work this way—but how apt, nonetheless, to imagine it as the extraterrestrial monster from James Cameron's *Aliens*. This is the sort of thing one thinks and then chastises oneself for thinking. Eggers records it all.

His biography, too, was representative. He was in San Francisco when the dot-coms emerged, he tried out for MTV's *The Real World*, he wrote lyrically of playing Frisbee. To see the picture of Eggers that appeared in *Vanity Fair*, in a room cluttered with books and pilfered US Postal Service bins, at an aged computer outfitted (we knew) with desktop publishing software, his hand up in a bemused wave-type gesture to the national audience suddenly focused on him through the camera lens, was to see the historical spirit of the past decade incarnated—this was what Hegel felt when he saw Napoleon on horseback. It's hard not to be bothered by the alternately sanctimonious and ingratiating tone that sometimes appears in the memoir and has appeared increasingly often in Eggers's writing and interviews since, and one can't shake the feeling that Eggers has a real problem with people who are not-Eggers. But he was very cool, in his way, and he showed the possibility of certain things. He indicated that it was not entirely impossible to speak in one's own voice before a national audience. It was a voice that grated, sometimes—but there was no use disowning it.

IN CALABASAS, I was allowed to sit in on the making of a *Log*. Gary's parents live in large one-story California contemporary perched over a canyon, with a fantastic view of the nearby mountains. Ronald Baum is a neurologist, with a doctor's discount subscriptions to more magazines than anyone could possibly read; Gary had the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Details*, *Detour*, *Brill's Content*, *Gear*, *Stuff*, and a few others stacked in neat piles on the floor. He installed himself at his computer, an unremarkable Pentium desktop with a good landline connection. Like all civilized procedures, this one began with email, and we found Gary's inbox so full of luminaries it should probably have been bronzed. Email was crucial, for the *Log* had gathered so much journalistic steam by then that most of Gary's material came from the kindness of sources; he also had, as he explained, "a whole series of email from weirdos." He read me the most recent such exchange: "Hello, Dave/Gary," the first email began, "I see Dave has taken up skywriting over Santa Monica. Cheers, Andy."

"He thinks I'm Dave, so he's going to play some sort of *McSweeney's*-type game. Let me show you the little interplay we went through. This is the typical weirdo type person. 'Dear Andy: As you may know, I live just north of L.A. What skywriting are you referring to?' He writes back: 'If you're Dave, you know. If you are just an aspiring journalist/writer, then you are on your own.' Okay, whatever. 'Dear Andy. I don't play cryptic games on email.' And he writes. 'If you want to be a journalist when you grow up you might want to learn how to get stories without being spoonfed.' I thought, I could go and deal with this or I could just move on and get away from the weirdos. So that was it with us. We haven't discussed anymore."

What did Andy want?

"I guess he wanted me to research some skywriting thing he did. Or Eggers did. Or I did, because he thinks I'm Eggers. You notice how I get weirdos. Sometimes I get the weirdest crap—and then I look at the address and it's from a college professor!"

That was just how things were with Eggers—people thought he was everywhere, and they thought they were the only ones who could understand him. Some apparently believed that the entire *Log* was just an extended Eggers prank, that Gary was in fact Eggers (this is not true). Others, and they were often people wishing to impress or woo the memoirist, were convinced that Gary had privileged access: "A lot of people think there's a phantom email address—like, there's the regular *McSweeney's* address, but people think I have a personal, direct line." Gary shrugged—if only.

Finished checking his email, Gary launched into cyberspace. He visited www.Medianews.com, where meta-media-related news items are posted by a hero of Gary's named Jim Romenesko; before Gary even began reading, he opened another browser, directing it toward *Salon*, so it could load while he read. Moments later, back on the Medianews site, a mention of Eggers appeared. "There you go!" cried Gary. "It is now 3:38 PM, and there is a new article at the *New York Times*: '"Dubya," "at risk," and "Eggers" have been banned at *Esquire*.' I wonder why."

Swiveling to me. "This is an example of how I'm just reading my normal thing and something Eggers-related comes up. I don't have to do any research, it sort of comes to me, he's all over the place." He didn't even read the article right away, but pasted it into his HTML editor, for later. "I sort of get into the rhythm, and I don't want to mess it up."

At this point Gary's mom came into the room with the mail. The University of Southern California, where Gary would begin studying journalism that fall, had sent some information, which Gary's mom read aloud to him. "Okay, Mom," Gary said after a while. "Goodbye, Mom."

"I get on his nerves," she explained to me. Then to Gary: "Could you hang up that sweatshirt?"

"Goodbye, Mom!"

Mrs. Baum left, and Gary was back in the thick of things. Later on, our discovery would join the *Log,* fully linked and numbered like a gossip-column cyber-*Tractatus*:

> [**36.e**] Anna Holmes published an article on Sunday, May 20th which detailed the "words and phrases [that] have been declared off-limits by . . . various magazines, in an effort to steer writers away from language that is hackneyed, imprecise or slangy." The piece, which appeared in the blacklisted *New York Times* [**29.a**], analyzed banned words lists at such glossy magazines as *Town & Country*, *Maxim*, *Gourmet*, *Glamour*, and *Allure*. Most interestingly, blacklisted *Esquire* [**3.g**] editor-in-chief David Granger [**34.a**] forbids even mentioning the name "Eggers" in his magazine since "he had a falling-out with the novelist . . . who worked at *Esquire* before he was famous."

The links lead to: the *New York Times* article, the *Log*'s description of Eggers's confrontation with the *Times*, the dark tale of the original blacklistee (the *New York Observer*), and the *Log* item on the *Details* article in which Granger sounds off about Eggers.

The "blacklist" was Gary's most infectious invention. First introduced in *Log #3*, it then cropped up nearly every time someone criticized Eggers. But in solid journalism school fashion Gary was scrupulous about it—he would refer to someone as being "most likely blacklisted," as if there were a blacklist somewhere, and until we saw it we couldn't be certain. "It seems that in [Cornel] Bon[c]a," he wrote after that critic had spoken less than flatteringly of the memoirist and his literary likenesses, "Eggers has found the latest addition to his Blacklist." Commenting on reviewer Mark Athitakis's claim that "Dave Eggers Thinks You're Stupid," Gary wrote: "Well, Mark Athitakis, you may feel stupid when you are written down on

Eggers's literary blacklist." The concept entered the mainstream discourse, with one *Details* profile citing a source near Eggers using the word "blacklist" to describe the people Eggers has it in for. When I asked Gary whether he really thought Eggers had a scrawled list of enemy writers taped to his shaving mirror, he said he was just hamming it up. "Anyway," he added, "if he did have a list, he wouldn't write it down. He'd have it in his head."

This was just one of Gary's contributions to the myth, for if he was not the most theoretically sophisticated observer of the Eggers gang, he was undoubtedly its most straight-talking and imaginative interpreter. Having created the Eggers-centric universe, he set about sowing it with conflict. In *Log #12*, he dubbed a number of the "lesser-to-mid-range *FoE!*s who are basically wannabe hangers-on"—"the Family." In *Log #7*, he went after the McSweeneys.net letters page, calling it a "halfway house" for would-be McSweeneyites. "When reading please notice how just about everyone who writes in has adopted Eggers's tone—it seems to amount to one of the most massive literary style hijackings that I can remember in recent history." According to a defense of the letters section that appeared on McSweeneys.net a few months later, the volume of letters had indeed dropped off significantly after the broadside from "the Baum kid."

It's true that at moments Gary began to resemble A. J. Weberman, the man who used to scavenge through Bob Dylan's trash on MacDougal Street. Gary himself suspected as much—"scraping the bottom of the week's literary news barrel" was the subtitle to the rather skimpy *Log #35*. Like Dylan—like the Beatles, for that matter, with all those proper girls in skirts, suddenly screaming—Eggers seemed to have unleashed an energy in the culture that had previously lain dormant, and Gary witnessed its most bizarre excesses. But Gary at least had Eggers's trash delivered via email, and usually he disdained to publish it. "I get a lot of stalker-type stuff, like, 'I saw Eggers at this restaurant in Brooklyn. He was picking his nose.' That sort of thing." Gary was indignant. "I can't use that."

INEVITABLY AND FROM the first, much of Eggers's fate as a popular icon was beyond his control. Perhaps most telling in this regard were his sometimes sour relations with the mainstream press. Early on, a reviewer for *US News & World Report* criticized "this anticorporate-media iconoclast" for refusing her magazine an interview and "delivering himself instead to a large media machine soon to merge with AOL," i.e., *Time*. This was an odd bit of revolutionary fervor for a mass-circulation weekly, but it was an irony of the sort that would repeatedly escape Eggers profilers. Article after article wondered aloud about his motives. "A longtime colleague," we were told in the *Details* profile, "says he can't decide whether Eggers's behavior is the result of 'genuine unhappiness and mania or a really long and ongoing promotional campaign.'" In the world of the "longtime colleague," it seems, unhappiness and mania: good; promotional campaign: bad. This from a magazine that exists for the sole purpose of selling canvas pants and sunglasses to the twentysomethings with whom Eggers is so popular—"a Sears catalog with 'tude," as the *Baffler* once put it.

All this was not, however, quite so ridiculous as it seemed. Like many of the significant cultural critics of his generation—most notably Tom Frank, editor of the Chicago-based *Baffler*, and Joshua Glenn, editor of the Boston-based *Hermenaut*—Eggers emerged from an early 1990s culture that, inspired in part by the indie-rock scene of the previous decade, had declared war on the predigested products of the mainstream media. Not only did they publish more scabrous, alienated writing, but, as if giving the finger to 600-word dispatches from foreign bureau chiefs, they gave it more room. (Gary Greenberg's 23,000-word "In the Kingdom of the Unabomber," probably the best *McSweeney's* article to date and certainly one of the best magazine articles in recent years, described how Greenberg, a psychiatrist, cultivated a relationship with Ted Kaczynski because it seemed the simplest and shortest route to getting published in a big-name magazine.) And the blood initially spilled by *McSweeney's* was glossy—there was the *Esquire* parody, and Eggers in interviews speaking of setting up his quarterly as a counterforce to the mainstream, ostentatiously running work that "doesn't know what year it is," and pieces that had been killed by other magazines. It was therefore natural, especially for journalists who had made their peace with Mammon, to question the authenticity of someone who'd pledged himself to the eternal margins.

But Eggers had never really done any such thing, and his relation to the mainstream was always tortured; he told interviewers that *Might*'s aggressive humiliation of celebrities was less a protest against the concept of fame than a way to level the playing field. Glenn, one of Eggers's few convincing opponents, once argued that *Might* was neither zine nor magazine but merely a "beautiful, glossy resume." Yet the nakedness of his ambition—and the nakedness of that nakedness—was part of Eggers's appeal. Unlike the musicians and even writers you typically see struggling to understand what journalists want from them, Eggers was, from the first, an apparatchik in the machinery of stardom. *A Heartbreaking Work* is in large part a meditation on fame, on the anger and disdain Eggers feels toward those who have it, and the ambivalence he might feel about having it himself. He wishes, he writes, "to become well known for his sorrows, or at least to let his suffering facilitate his becoming well known, while at the same time not shrinking from the admission of such manipulations of his pain for profit," and so on, in Eggers's quick chatty overheated-exactly-the-right-amount prose. He has suffered; shouldn't he reap the rewards? Eggers's book manages both ostentatious reticence and fame-seeking, though ultimately it is forced to choose fame. For in the vein of the the-novel-being-written-in-this-novel-is-the-novel-you-are-reading novel, *A Heartbreaking Work* says, in effect, "I want to be famous, I do not want to be famous. You are reading . . . you are finishing . . . are you almost done with this book? Then I am famous. Sucker."

After achieving success, Eggers became increasingly adamant about controlling his own presentation. Initially generous with his time, he eventually refused to allow journalists to quote from face-to-face interviews; then he began demanding that interviews be published in a word-for-word Q&A format. Not even Nabokov was this picky, and it is a testament to Eggers's popularity that people still tried to interview him. And even that they still wrote about him—for in those years he used his website to embarrass reporters from the *New York Observer*, *Time*, *New York*, the *Village Voice*, and finally the *New York Times*. McSweeneys.net even began a department of "clarifications" (which includes three real clarifications plus a fake clarification of the *New York Times Book Review* by Neal Pollack). The clarifications were usually fair—as when the *Voice* claimed that sales for a *McSweeney's* book were poor, when the opposite was true—but sometimes capricious, as when a correction to the same *Voice* article took violent exception to the use of the term "ironic" in reference to *McSweeney's*.

It was easy to sympathize with Eggers in most of his battles with a lazy and often sneering press corps. But he also showed how draining and nasty and mutually destructive such a campaign could be. One of the longest pieces Eggers published in the year and a half after his memoir appeared was a 10,000-word "clarification," on McSweeneys.net, of a short profile done by the *New York Times*. Eggers reprinted his entire email correspondence with the *Times* reporter, David Kirkpatrick, who had published a somewhat unpleasant piece after expressing, in his emails, his great enthusiasm for Eggers's work. The reaction to Eggers's exposé was mostly negative—this sort of thing simply wasn't *done*. The flare-up "put the buzz back into the 'Staggering Genius' author's court," reported Gary. "However, said buzz has probably not been what The Dave had intended." In fact, Gary went so far as to claim (for, admittedly, the umpteenth time) that "the literary hipsters who have been trailing [Eggers] for over a year now just seem to have had enough of his antics." For his own part, though, Gary was thrilled. "He came into school, he couldn't believe it," Jeff Partain, Gary's journalism teacher and himself an Eggers fan, told me. "He just thought it was hilarious that anything like that could happen."

A few *Logs* later, having recorded much of the criticism Eggers was subject to (including the inevitable "long-time Eggers watcher" wondering, "'Is it some sort of brilliant marketing strategy? I'm not saying it is, but it just might be.'"—*Entertainment Weekly*), Gary linked to a fawning article on Eggers in a Madison-based paper, which printed its interview with him verbatim, as per instructions. "Welcome," Gary announced, "to the fate of the Eggers interview in the post-Kirkpatrick world."

GARY, TOO, WHEN I came to visit, was extremely careful about the "Gary" on display. He was on the one hand accommodating, perpetually asking what I wanted to know, imagining what it was that could possibly interest me. I happened to arrive the day after prom, and one afternoon we went to lunch with a friend of Gary's who'd had a particularly interesting night, of which he told us in some detail. I was thrilled with my infiltration of teen culture; I would tell the world! But Gary immediately swore me to secrecy; anyway, he explained, he'd set up the whole conversation, and teen-land was henceforth closed: "That was a one-time thing." During dinner, a thought would occur to him. "Here's something you might be able to use," he said one evening over his matzo ball soup—and I could feel that in his mind he was helping me write, "over his matzo ball soup"—and told me how, when he was in fifth grade, a girl he liked named Hillary chose one of Mel Gibson's sons over him. Thus, I was to conclude, his peculiar attitude toward celebrity.

He was fastidious about his responses, often referring me to places in the *Log* where he'd "already answered" my questions. "I keep talking to you ad nauseam," he said happily after one exhausting session, "and I get tired, and you wait for me to say something stupid. That's part of your plan, isn't it?" Every time we talked he was listening to himself, measuring the length of my paragraphs, imagining the magazine font. "I've learned something from the *Log*," he explained. "You only get one chance to make your image." He warned me that whatever I wrote would be subject to "clarification" on his site; that there might even be an extra special edition of the *Log* devoted wholly to this important task. After saying something to this effect, he would look up at me expectantly and ask: "You're going to cream me, aren't you?" Imagining it already, a job well done. "Man. You're going to *kill* me."

GARY WAS, UNFORTUNATELY, no stranger to the brutality of the publicity machine. The most famous event in the history of the *Log*, the Beth Eggers emails, may also be the ugliest episode in the whole Eggers story. It began several months after the *Log* was created, when Eggers's older sister, a lawyer, wrote Gary an email. "She writes to me and she's really pissed off," Gary recalled. "I say, okay, why hasn't anyone contacted you? There have been all these stories, there was a story in the *Chicago Tribune*. She says it's because she's not listed, and [Eggers] isn't giving out her number. So I say, 'Well, you can put it on my site, people read it. That can be your forum.' I took out all the swearing, though." In *Log #6*, "The Beth Eggers Exclusive," Gary posted several comments in which Eggers's sister claimed, angrily, that Dave had minimized her role in the raising of their little brother. "I am the sister who supposedly 'helped out' while Dave 'raised his little brother alone,'" the comments began. "Yeah right."

Some time later, *Harper's* contacted Gary to say they wished to run a portion of the comments in their reprints section. Gary was thrilled—this was the big-time. When the *Harper's* came out that July, Gary was in the middle of a five-week summer program for high school journalists at Northwestern; at an assembly of the students, the director of the program congratulated Gary on the scoop, on going big-time.

What Gary hadn't known was that Beth Eggers's comments would be printed alongside a lengthy and extremely self-serving diatribe against the notion of "indie cred" that Dave Eggers had produced during an interview with the *Harvard Advocate*. ("I say yes when Hollywood says they'll give me enough money to publish a hundred different books, or send twenty kids through college. Saying no is so fucking boring.") Taken together, the reprints were quite clearly meant to make Eggers look bad. Eggers, naturally, was upset. On McSweeneys.net, he posted a response, reprinting a strange letter of retraction from Beth Eggers and referring to Gary as a "16 year old boy who publishes a Web site which, creepily enough, talks mostly nicely and in detail about me." He suggested that both *Harper's* and Gary had behaved unscrupulously in the affair.

Gary was distraught. "That's the only time I heard him talk about [the *Log*]," he told me later. "I had the most innocent intentions, and he made them look really sinister. I was going to write some screed, right when I read it, just ranting about it. But I decided to wait a couple of days, adjust." When he finally sat down, he challenged Eggers's version of the story, and stressed that he didn't mean any harm with his site. "I am not running some sort of scorched earth gossip column here. This is just for fun. She had something interesting to say that I thought the *FoE! Log* readers would enjoy, so, with her approval, I published it."

It was just for fun, and then . . . all this. Gary had been trying to get Eggers to notice the *Log*—this had, properly enough, been one of the *Log*'s central themes.

Like every writer in the age of the Internet, Gary lived in terror of oblivion. There had never before been so many people writing, and publishing, who suffered precisely that fate. All those unread websites—what do they say if not that there, but for fortune and a copy of Strunk and White, sit you? The only time Gary had ever met Eggers, at a reading in Pasadena when the *Log* was still in its infancy, he'd handed him a card with the URL. No acknowledgment ever arrived. By *Log #10*, Gary was petulant: "Eggers makes it quite clear that he almost never sneaks a peak at any Web site devoted to him. Personally, I find this a bit elitist. I mean, it is not like he is John Grisham or anything . . . he has been under the microscope for about four or five months now and he is already too good for the web?"

The keeper of the *Log* had by then become the topic of conversation and conjecture; *Log #11* (subhead: "The last postmodernist gambit I've got left") was devoted entirely to reproducing and annotating a series of comments about the *Log* from *Salon*'s discussion forum. Initially hostile, the tide of the postings turned when one of the participants discovered that "Gary Baum is, how shall I put this, sixteen. We should be grateful he's writing things on [the] internet and not doing crank." (Gary's footnote: "Ouch.") Why, as Gary would inform us in *Log #19*, even Zadie Smith had written! Yet there had never been any sign that Eggers himself read the *Log*; and now that he finally acknowledged Gary he was simultaneously angry and condescending, and still maintained that he'd never actually visited the site.

A year later, Gary would become noticeably upset whenever the incident came up—which it did, often. It was the *Log*'s moment of greatest exposure, and, as is often the case, its lowest point. Beth Eggers was a practicing lawyer, in her thirties, sending profanity-laced emails about her family history to a stranger. It was clear, from what she wrote Gary and from her letter of retraction, that she was having some sort of nervous breakdown. Gary should not have posted her comments, and though he continued to stand by what he did on purely technical grounds, I think he knew this. He wrote about the incident in his application essay for NYU's journalism program, expressing regret for having caused Eggers's younger brother Christopher any pain. But I also had the sense that what made the confrontation most difficult for Gary was that Eggers, who had been merely the proper-name adjective attached to the "Dave Eggers Literary Phenomenon," suddenly became a real person, and one who was upset with Gary Baum. Put another way, what is missing from the *Log* is not so much a spell-checker as a sense that the people being written about are people; that people can become wounded and angry; that they do not always see your best intentions. The truth is that though Gary, deep down, did not believe that anything so unfair as a blacklist exists, it does. That, too, is how the world works.

When I visited, Gary still maintained the hope that Eggers would come around. "I don't think he's read enough of it to get what I'm doing," he told me. "I think he'd appreciate it, if he read it from start to finish." In truth, if Eggers read the *Log* entire he would emerge with a ringing headache and a question: How can this kid still like me? For from the very start, Gary opened the floor to Eggers's critics—both to mainstream journalists who seemed mostly offended by Eggers's occasional bad manners, and to serious opponents like Josh Glenn, who believes that Eggers is merely "a magician posing as a writer" who has, "like many con men," become "really good at what he was just pretending to be good at." As the *Log* progressed, Gary became sharper, wittier, more certain of his voice. But in its last few months the *Log* also became darker. One *New York* magazine declared Eggers tops in the bizarrely conceived category of the "10 Most Overexposed Writers of 2000." *Vanity Fair* announced that he was "out" as the Gen-X writer of choice. After Eggers's conflict with the *New York Times*, Gary wondered whether he would "follow in the footsteps of Salinger or Roth." (David Lee Roth, that is.) "Fallout From a Brilliant Marketing Strategy," went the title of *Log #30*: "The Tide Begins to Turn Against the Literary Hero." *Log #32*, subhead: "Swimming against postmodernism's backwash." *Log #34*: "Just About Ready For Crucifixion." *Log #35*: "McSweeney's Quietly Sells Out." *Log #40*'s tragic subhead: "Over the hill, but still under the radar."

As the backlash he'd been waiting for finally set in ("I knew there'd be a backlash," he said. "I predicted that. A year ago!"), Gary was like the long-time biographer, weary with too much knowing. Other aspects of the world Eggers inhabited gained his attention, and then even his digressions became depressing. In *#34* he quoted a gossipy account of a book party thrown for debutante-novelist Lucinda Rosenfeld—"a smash, cram-packed with *New Yorker*ites, including fiction editor Bill Buford, who worked great wonders with Lucinda's book *What She Saw* . . . —primarily by running a powerfully fetching photograph of the lithe Rosenfeld alongside his excerpt of her work in the *New Yorker*." This was just too horrible—the cutesy neologizing, the notion that a *New Yorker* editor's main job is to choose a sexy photograph—but one sensed that it was not beside the point. The truth is that this sort of thing stood at the dark heart of the *Log*, which was not and had never been about Eggers. The *Log* was about fame: the fame that Eggers had and the fame that Gary wanted. It was about the wages of such fame, its conditions, its uses. There were occasional literary quotations in the *Log*, but they were not from Eggers's book; there were references to literary figures, but only insofar as their careers were concerned. Larger questions were being dealt with here. How does one take the enormous apparatus of celebrity-creation and force it to do one's bidding? How does one, to put it more succinctly, conquer the world?

It was a good question, a Balzacian question. And one was struck by the optimism of it, the innocence. I kept asking Gary whether he'd become disenchanted by the dirty secrets of the literary world, whether he still thought it a world worth conquering. He wasn't, and he did. Because though Gary proved beyond the doubt of any reasonable reader that literary fame, and literature itself, is a vast and intricate conspiracy, the trick of the *Log* was that it wasn't a conspiracy he abhorred. He wanted in, he merely wanted in.

But no one escapes unharmed. Eggers's ugly battles with the press marred the good feeling he had initially intended to cultivate with *McSweeney's*; embattled, he denounced all literary critics as essentially motivated by *ressentiment*; and in the addendum to the paperback edition of *A Heartbreaking Work*, one saw a sanctimonious, bullying and precious tone creep into his writing, a tone that in the original portion of the memoir was fully submerged beneath the humor and self-mockery of his adventures in parenting. Eggers had, all things considered, handled fame admirably, but it handled him more. And the truth is that Gary—sweet, curious Gary, who lit up when he imagined what it would be like to actually meet Eggers: "I have so many questions. I could talk to him for hours, even if he just said, yes, no, yes."—the truth is that this Gary had a hand in the unpleasantness surrounding Egger in the year and a half after his memoir appeared. And in so doing, it should probably be added, to complete the ledger, he produced a very interesting piece of writing.

In Calabasas, I tried to dissuade Gary from his infatuation with New York's trivial aspects—to explain, at the very least, that there were writers there who did not attend book parties. But it was no use: some illusions can only be lost along the way. And perhaps, like the illusion of fame, they are only illusions until they happen, when they fall on you like a ton of bricks. "I know there's an ending somewhere," Gary said of the *Log*. "I just don't know where it is. First I thought: I'll do it for a year. Then I thought I'd do it until I got up to his age—*Log #30*. But that was when the Kirkpatrick thing happened, and I couldn't end it there. Now I'm thinking maybe I'll stop when they make the movie: like, that's it, they've made a movie of his life, there can be no more. Maybe it's this article: when I go from being outside to being the subject. Or you know what would be really great? If I could announce: 'Okay, I got my first book deal. Thanks, that's all.' Either that, or I get hired by *Esquire*."

POSTSCRIPT

This article was written for the *Atlantic* in the summer of 2001, edited, and set up in type by mid-November. At that point Mike Kelly, the *Atlantic*'s editor, received a phone call from Dave Eggers informing him that Beth Eggers had committed suicide.

I spent the next few days on the phone with Cullen Murphy, the magazine's managing editor, wondering what to do. Everything in the article was still true, but the tone was all wrong—the focus on Gary's goofiness, the scene with his mother and the sweatshirt, Gary's reflections on postmodernism in a Los Angeles parking lot. Cullen proposed a thought experiment: If Beth Eggers had died six months earlier, would we have embarked on the piece? The answer was no.

Gary was by then in his freshman year at USC. He was studying journalism. Over the summer, Cullen had shaken his head when I told him about Gary's choice of major. "He should get away from that stuff," he said. "Study religion. Or math."

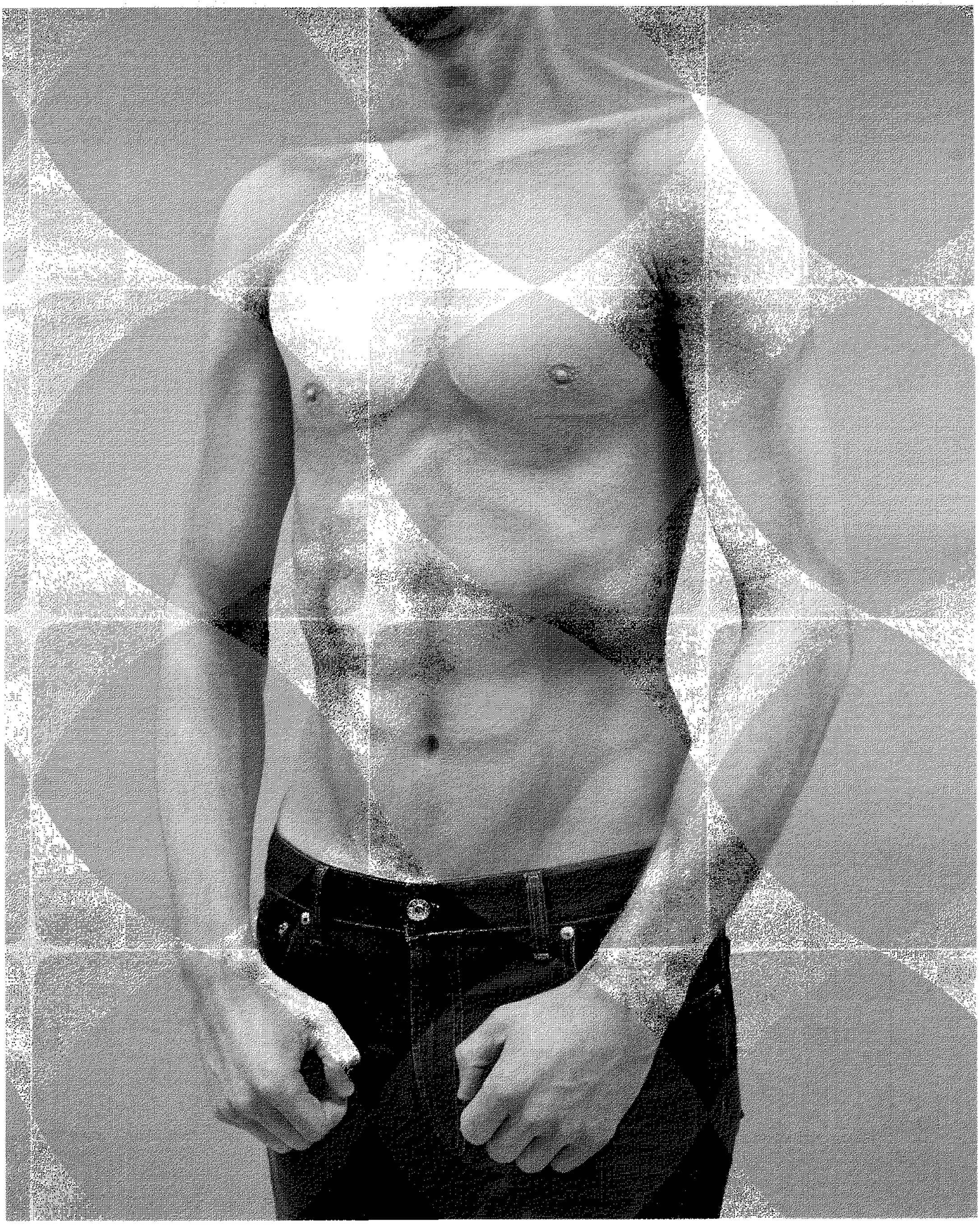
In November, Cullen and I spent some time on the phone discussing how to tell Gary about Beth Eggers's suicide. The fear was that he would blame himself.

I called Gary from Syracuse, where I had begun a graduate program in writing. Gary wondered, briefly, whether I thought he had anything to do with what happened to Eggers's sister. I said no way.

Later that week, I learned that people close to Eggers were engaged in a furious email and phone campaign. Like fictional villains suddenly sprung to life, they accused the *Atlantic* and me of delaying the article so we could dig up dirt on Beth; they contacted a number of editors and writers, including my teachers at Syracuse, to create pressure on the article; and they suggested that Gary was responsible for Beth Eggers's suicide. At one point, Gary's mom received a phone call from a woman demanding that she make Gary take down the site. When the woman refused to identify herself, Amy Baum hung up.

THREE YEARS LATER, the *Log* is still there, but it has not been updated, and many of the links have expired, and some of the magazines and sites to which it pointed have disappeared. And three summers after I visited Gary in California, I'm ready to admit that, at least for now, we've lost the battle for his education. At USC, he has prospered. He has joined a fraternity; he has a cute girlfriend; in party photos he occasionally sends me, Gary wears cool nerd glasses, his face more adult, his jaw squared, and that acne I mentioned, the only line in the article he begged me to take out, looks pretty much whipped. After a stint on the *Daily Trojan*, he's now the editor of *28th Street*, a new monthly lifestyle magazine targeted at L.A.'s college students, written in the college-ironic style. Each issue has an ad on the back cover from a strip club called "Valley Ball." A few months ago, *28th Street* featured a short piece on Joe Francis, the founder of the Girls Gone Wild empire. The teaser wondered: "Is Joe Francis a Marketing Genius?"

As for that other marketing genius, Dave Eggers, I'm no longer on the beat. But what happened in the week after his call to Mike Kelly—the contacting of editors and agents; the jockeying for position; the incredible air of entitlement surrounding the whole thing—did answer one important question: Why, in Gary's *Log*, did the New York media insiders, the editors of lifestyle magazines and the authors of their puff pieces, all so insistently cry "Phony!" whenever Dave Eggers came up? Evidently they knew he was one of them, and they were amazed he could get away so long with pretending otherwise. Of course, they were right. +



Torso (Dedicated to the memory of L.D.S.). Jesse Reed, ©2004

AGAINST EXERCISE

Mark Greif

Were "In the Penal Colony" to be written today, Kafka could only be speaking of an exercise machine. Instead of the sentence to be tattooed on its victims, the machine would inscribe lines of numbers. So many calories, so many miles, so many watts, so many laps.

Modern exercise makes you acknowledge the machine operating inside yourself. Nothing can make you believe we harbor nostalgia for factory work but a modern gym. The lever of the die press no longer commands us at work. But with the gym we import vestiges of the leftover equipment of industry into our leisure. We leave the office, and put the conveyor belt under our feet, and run as if chased by devils. We willingly submit our legs to the mangle, and put our stiffening arms to the press.

It is crucial that the machines are simple. The inclined planes, pins, levers, pulleys, locks, winches, racks, and belts of the Nautilus and aerobic machines put earlier stages of technical progress at our disposal in miniature. The elements are visible and intelligible for our use but not dangerous to us. Displaced, neutralized, they are traces of a necessity which no longer need be met with forethought or ingenuity. A farmer once used a pulley, cable, and bar to lift his roofbeam; you now use the same means to work your lats.

Today, when we assume our brains are computers, the image of a machine-man, whether Descartes's or La Mettrie's, has an old and venerable quality, like a yellowed poster on the infirmary wall. Blood pressure is hydraulics, strength is mechanics, nutrition is combustion, limbs are levers, joints are ball-in-socket. The exercise world does not make any notable conceptual declaration that we are mechanical men and women. We already were that, at least as far as our science is concerned. Rather it expresses a will, on the part of each and every individual, to discover and regulate the machine-like processes in his own body.

And we go to this hard labor with no immediate reward but our freedom to do it. Precisely this kind of freedom may be enough. Exercise machines offer you the superior mastery of subjecting your body to experimentation. We hide our reasons for undertaking this labor, and thoughtlessly substitute a new necessity.

No one asks whether we want to drag our lives across a threshold into the kingdom of exercise.

Exercise is no choice. It comes to us as an emissary from the realm of biological processes. It falls under the jurisdiction of the obligations of life itself, which only the self-destructive neglect. Our controversial future is supposed to depend on engineered genes, brain scans, neuroscience, laser beams. About those things, we have loud, public, sterile debates—while the real historic changes are accomplished on a gym's vinyl mats, to the sound of a flywheel and a ratcheted inclined plane.

IN THE GYM you witness people engaging in a basic biological process of self-regulation. All of its related activities reside in the private realm. A question, then, is why exercise doesn't stay private. It could have belonged at home with other processes it resembles: eating, sleeping, defecating, cleaning, grooming, and masturbating.

Exerciser, what do you see in the mirrored gym wall? You make the faces associated with pain, with tears, with orgasm, with the sort of exertion that would call others to your immediate aid. But you do not hide your face. You groan as if pressing on your bowels. You repeat grim labors, as if mopping the floor. You huff and you shout and strain. You appear in tight yet shapeless lycra costumes. These garments reveal the shape of the genitals and the mashed and bandaged breasts to others' eyes, without acknowledging the lure of sex.

Though we get our word *gymnasium* from the Greeks, our modern gym is not in their spirit. Athletics in the ancient institution were public and agonistic. They consisted of the training of boys for public contests. The gymnasium was closest to what we know as a boxing gym, with the difference that it was also the place adult men gathered to admire the most beautiful boys and, in the Greek fashion, sexually mentor them. It was the preeminent place to promote the systematic education of the young, and for adults to carry on casual debates among themselves, modeling the intellectual sociability, separated from overt politics, that is the origin of Western philosophy. Socrates spent most of his time in gymnasia. Aristotle began his philosophical school in the covered walkway of a gymnasium.

The Socratic and Peripatetic methods could find little support in a modern gym. What we moderns do there belongs to mute privacy. The Greeks put their genuinely private acts into a location, an *oikos*, the household. To the household belonged all the acts that sustained bare biological life. That included the labor of keeping up a habitation and a body, growing food and eating it, bearing children and feeding them. Hannah Arendt interpreted this strong Greek distinction of the household from the public sphere as a symbol of a general truth, that it is necessary to keep the acts which sustain naked life away from others' observation. A hidden sphere, free from scrutiny, provides the foundation for a public person—someone sure enough in his privacy to take the drastic risks of public life, to think, to speak against others' wills, to choose, with utter independence. In privacy, alone with one's family, the dominating necessity and speechless appetites could be gratified in the non-thought and ache of staying alive.

Our gym is better named a "health club," except that it is no club for equal meetings of members. It is the atomized space in which one does formerly private things, before others' eyes, with the lonely solitude of a body acting as if it were still in private. One tries out these contortions to undo and remake a private self; and if the watching others aren't entitled to approve, some imagined aggregate "other" does. Modern gym exercise moves biology into the nonsocial company of strangers. You are supposed to coexist but not look closely, wipe down the metal of handlebars and rubber of mats as if you had not left a trace. As in the elevator, you are expected to face forward.

It is like a punishment for our liberation. The most onerous forms of necessity, the struggle for food, against disease, always by means of hard labor, have been overcome. It might have been naïve to think the new human freedom would push us towards a society of public pursuits, like Periclean Athens, or of simple delight in what exists, as in Eden. But the true payoff of a society that chooses to make private freedoms and private leisures its main substance has been much more unexpected. This payoff is a set of forms of bodily self-regulation which drag the last vestiges of biological life into the light as a social attraction.

THE ONLY TRULY essential pieces of equipment in modern exercise are numbers. Whether at the gym or on the running path, rudimentary calculation is the fundamental technology. As the weights that one lifts are counted, so are distances run, time exercised, heart rates elevated.

A simple negative test of whether an activity is modern exercise is to ask whether it could be done meaningfully without counting or measuring it. (In sports, numbers are used differently; there, scores are a way of recording competition in a social encounter.) Forms of exercise which do away with mechanical equipment, as running does, cannot do away with this.

In exercise one gets a sense of one's body as a collection of numbers representing capabilities. The other location where an individual's numbers attain such talismanic status is the doctor's office. There is a certain seamlessness between all the places where exercise is done and the sites where people are tested for illnesses, undergo repairs, and die. In the doctor's office, the blood lab, and the hospital, you are at the mercy of counting experts. A lab technician in a white coat takes a sample of blood. A nurse tightens a cuff on your arm, links you to an EKG, takes the basic measurements of your height, and weight—never to your satisfaction. She rewards you with the obvious numbers for blood pressure, body-fat ratio, height and weight. The clipboard with your numbers is passed. At last the doctor takes his seat, a mechanic who wears the white robe of an angel and is as arrogant as a boss. In specialist language, exacerbating your dread and expectation, you may learn your numbers for cholesterol (two types), your white cells, your iron, immunities, urinalysis, and so forth. He hardly needs to remind you that these numbers correlate with your chances of survival.

How do we acquire the courage to exist as a set of numbers? Turning to the gym or the track you gain the anxious freedom to count yourself. What a relief it can be. Here are numbers you can change. You make the exercises into trials you perform upon matter within reach, the exterior armor of your fat and muscle. You are assured these numbers, too, and not only the black marks in the doctor's files, will correspond to how long you have to live. With willpower and sufficient discipline, that is, the straitening of yourself to a rule, you will be changed.

The gym resembles a voluntary hospital. Its staff members are also its patients. Some machines put you in a traction you can escape, while others undo the imprisonment of a respirator, cueing you to pump your lungs yourself, and tracking your heart rate on a display. Aided even by a love that can develop for your pains, this self-testing becomes second nature.

The curious compilation of numbers that you are becomes an aspect of your freedom, sometimes the most important, even more preoccupying than your thoughts or dreams. You discover what high numbers you can become, and how immortal. For you, high roller, will live forever. You are eternally maintained.

THE JUSTIFICATION FOR the total scope of the responsibility to exercise is health. A further extension of the counting faculty of exercise gives a precise economic character to health. It determines the anticipated numbers for the days and hours of one's life.

Today we really can preserve ourselves for a much longer time. The means of preservation are reliable and cheap. The haste to live one's mortal life diminishes. The temptation toward perpetual preservation grows. We preserve the living corpse in an optimal state, not that we may do something with it, but for its own good feelings of eternal fitness, confidence, and safety. We hoard our capital to earn interest, and subsist each day on crusts of bread. But no one will inherit our good health after we've gone. The hours of life maintenance vanish with the person.

The person who does not exercise, in our current conception, is a slow suicide. He fails to take responsibility for his life. He doesn't labor strenuously to forestall his death. Therefore we begin to think he causes it.

It may be a comfort to remember when one of your parents' acquaintances dies that he did not eat well or failed to take up running. The nonexerciser is lumped with other unfortunates whom we socially discount. Their lives are worth a percentage of our own, through their own neglect. Their value is compromised by the failure to assure the fullest term of possible physical existence. The nonexerciser joins all the unfit: the slow, the elderly, the poor, and the hopeless. "Don't you want to 'live?'" we say. No answer of theirs could satisfy us.

Conceive of a society in which it was believed that the senses could be used up. Eyesight worsened the more vivid sights you saw. Hearing worsened the more intense sounds you heard. It would be inevitable that such a conception would bleed into people's whole pattern of life, changing the way they spent their days. Would they use up their powers on the most saturated colors, listening to the most intoxicating sounds? Or might its members refuse to move, eyes shut, ears covered, nursing the remaining reserves of sensation? We, too, believe our daily lives are not being lived, but eaten up by age. And we spend our time desperately. From the desperate materialist gratifications of a hedonistic society, commanding immediate comfort and happiness, we recoil to the desperate economics of health, and chase a longer span of happinesses deferred, and comforts delayed, by disposing of the better portion of our lives in life-preservation.

Exercise does make you, as a statistical person, part of different aggregate categories that die with less frequency at successive ages. It furnishes a gain in odds. This is the main public rationale for those billions of man- and woman-hours in the gym. The truth, however, is also that being healthy makes you feel radically different. For a segment of its most ardent practitioners, exercise in its contemporary form is largely a quest for certain states of feeling. A more familiar phenomenon than the young person who is unhappy physically from never exercising is the young exerciser who suffers from missing one or two days of exercise. The most common phenomenon may be the individual who judges, in his own mind if not out loud, the total healthiness of his state at each moment based on what he ate, what he drank, how much he exercised, when, with what feelings as he was doing it, and with what relation to the new recommendation or warning he just heard on the news hour's health report. One feels healthier even when the body doesn't feel discernably different. Or the body does begin to feel different—lighter, stronger, more efficient, less toxic—in ways that exceed the possible consequences of the exercises performed. This may be a more important psychic "medicalization of human life" than anything a doctor can do with his tests.

THE LESS RESPECTABLE but even more powerful justification for day-to-day exercise is thinness. It involves the disciplining of a depraved will, rather than the righteous responsibility to maintain the health of the body-machine and its fund of capital.

Women strip their bodies of layers of fat to reveal a shape without its normal excess of flesh. Despite the new emphasis on female athleticism, the task of the woman exerciser remains one of emaciation. Men thin themselves, too, but more importantly bloat particular muscles, swelling the major clusters in the biceps, chest, and thighs. They awaken an incipient musculature that no work or normal activity could bring out in toto. Theirs is a task of expansion and discovery. Women's emacation is a source for feminine eye-rolling and rueful nicknames: the "social X-ray," the actress as skin and bones. Men's proud expansion and discovery of six muscles of the lower abdomen, reminiscent of an insect's segmented exoskeleton, likewise becomes a byword and a joke: the "six-pack," bringing exercise together with the masculinity of drinking.

Unlike the health model, which seems to make a continuous gain on mortality, thinness and muscle-expansion operate in a cruel economy of accelerated loss. Mortality began when the first man and woman left the Garden. Everyone has to die, but no one has to shape a physique, and once body-altering begins, it is more implacable than death. Every exerciser knows that the body's propensity to put on weight is the physical expression of a moral fall. Every exerciser knows that the tendency of the body to become soft when it is comfortable or at rest, instead of staying perpetually hard, is a failure of discipline. This is the taste of our new Tree of Knowledge. In our era of abundance, we find that nutrition makes one fat rather than well-fed, pleasures make one flabby rather than content, and only anorexics have the willpower to stop eating and die.

Exercise means something other than health to a young person who conceives sexual desirability as the truth about herself most worth defending. And youth is becoming permanent, in the demand that adults keep up an outward show of juvenile sexuality. The body becomes the location of sexiness, rather than clothes or wit or charisma. This is less true for society—which values personality still—than for the exerciser herself, who imagines an audience that doesn't exist. Saddest of all is the belief that an improved body will bestow bliss on the unloved.

The shock troops of modern exercise are women just past the college years. Only recently the beneficiary of a sexually mature body, and among our culture's few possessors by native right of the reduced body type we prefer—which we daily prefer more openly, more vehemently—the girl of twenty-two is a paradoxical figure as an exemplar of exercise. She is not yet among the discounted. But she knows her destiny. She starts immediately to get ahead in the race to preserve a form that must never exceed the barest minimum of flesh. A refreshing honesty can exist among exercisers who are not yet caught up in the doctrine of health. The rising incidence of smoking among young women, which worries public health advocates, is coincident with the rising incidence of gym exercise, which doesn't. While the cigarette suppresses appetite (rebelliously), the stairmaster attacks calories (obediently). Each can become intensely, erotically pleasurable, and neither is really meant for health or longevity.

The doctrine of thinness introduces a radical fantasy of exercise down to the bone. It admits the dream of a body unencumbered by any excess of corporeality. Thanatos enters through the door opened by Eros, and exercise flirts with a will to annihilate the unattractive body rather than to preserve its longevity. Without an accompanying ideology of health, thinness would in fact liquidate all restraints, generating a death's-head vision of exercise. Health curiously returns as the only brake on a practice that otherwise would become a kind of naked aggression against the body.

With health in place, the aggression is more likely to be carried on psychically. It pools, then starts an undercurrent of hatred for this corrupt human form that continually undoes the labor you invest in it. One-hundred twenty pounds of one's own flesh starts to seem like the Sisyphean boulder. Yet the bitterness of watching your body undo your work is restrained by a curious compensation which Sisyphus did not know. If the hated body is the scene of a battle, a certain pleasure still emerges from the unending struggle, and, in a hedonistic order divided against its own soft luxuries, at least *this* pleasure, if no other, can be made to go on forever.

An enigma of exercise is the proselytizing urge that comes with it. Exercisers are always eager for everyone else to share their experience. Why must others exercise, if one person does?

No one who plays baseball or hockey demands everyone else play the sport. Sports are social. Their victories become visible in the temporary public arrangements of a game. Perhaps accomplishments recognized by others in the act of their occurrence can be left alone. The gym-goer, on the other hand, is a solitary evangelist. He is continually knocking on your door, to get you to recognize the power that will not give him peace. You, too, must exercise. Even as he worries for your salvation, nevertheless, he has the gleam of someone who is ahead of you already, one chosen by God.

Running is most insidious because of its way of taking proselytizing out of the gym. It is a direct invasion of public space. It lays the counting, the pacing, the controlled frenzy, the familiar undergarment-outergarments and skeletal look, on top of the ordinary practice of an outdoor walk. One thing that can be said for a gym is that an implied contract links everyone who works out in its mirrored and pungent hangar. All consent to undertake separate exertions and hide any mutual regard, as in a well-ordered masturbatorium. The gym is in this sense more polite than the narrow riverside, street, or nature path, wherever runners take over shared places for themselves. With his speed and narcissistic intensity the runner corrupts the space of walking, thinking, talking, and everyday contact. He jostles the idler out of his reverie. He races between pedestrians in conversation. The runner can oppose sociability and solitude by publicly sweating on them.

No doubt the unsharability of exercise stimulates an unusual kind of loneliness.

When exercise does become truly shared and mutually visible, as in the aerobics that come close to dance, or the hardcore bodybuilding that is always erotic and fraternal, it nears sport or art and starts to reverse itself. When exercise is done in a private home, or in untenanted landscapes, or without formal method, apparatus, or counting, it recovers certain eccentric freedoms of private techniques of the self.

However, the pure category of modern exercise is concerned not with the creative process of reproduction (as in activities-in-common), nor the pure discoveries of solitude (as in private eccentricity). It pursues an idea of replication. Replication in exercise recreates the shape and capabilities of others in the material of your own body, without new invention, and without exchange with others or crossing-over of material between selves.

It is a puzzling question, in fact, whether "you" and "your body" are the same in exercise. If on the one hand exercise seems strongly to identify exercisers with their bodies, by putting them to shared labor, on the other hand it seems to estrange them from the bodies they must care for and manage. Where does "fitness" actually reside? It seems to be deep inside you; yet that inside has risen to a changeable surface. And this surface is no longer one you can take off, as you did a costume in earlier methods of improving your allure. Fashion historians point out that women freed themselves from corsets worn externally, only to make an internal corset, as they toned the muscles of the abdomen and chest, and dieted and exercised to burn away permanently the well fed body that whalebone stays temporarily restrained. Though the exerciser acts on his *self*, this self becomes ever more identified with the visible surface. Though he works on *his* body, replication makes it ever more, so to speak, *anybody*.

DOES THIS CRITIQUE imply a hatred of the body? On the contrary. The ethos of gym exercise annihilates the margin of safety that humans have when they relate to their own bodies. Men and women seem more ashamed of their own actual bodies in the present environment of biological exposure than in a pre-gym past. An era of exercise has brought more obsession and self-hatred rather than less.

A feminist worry becomes important. It is certainly possible to make people used to displaying to others' eyes the biological processes of transformation. And this has been, at times, the aim of feminists, who intended to attack a patriarchy that vilified the natural body or that made biological processes a source of shame and inferiority. But the forms of exposure which have recently arisen are not in line with feminist liberation of the unconditioned body.

Patriarchy made biology a negative spectacle, a filth that had to be hidden. The ethos of exercise makes it a positive spectacle, a competitive fascination that must be revealed. The rhetoric of "loving the body" can thus be misused. With the extension of the cliché that one should "not be ashamed" of the body, people are less able to defend themselves against the prospect that their actual bodies, and biological processes, may be manifest at every moment, in new states of disciplining neither public nor private. It becomes a retrogression, a moral failing in these people, to wish to defend against exposure, or to withdraw their health, bodies, arousal, and self-regulation from the social scene, as if privacy of this kind were mere prudery or repression.

Once subjected to this socialization of biological processes, the body suffers a new humiliation no longer rooted in the distinctions between the revealed and the hidden, the natural and the shameful, the sexual ideal and the physical actuality, but in the deeper crime of merely *existing* as the unregulated, the unshaped, the unsexy, the "unfit."

OUR PRACTICES ARE turning us inside out. Our hidden flesh becomes our public front. The private medical truth of bodily health becomes our psychic self-regard. Action in public before strangers and acquaintances has disappeared from the lived experience of the citizen and been replaced by *exercise* in public, as speech gives way to biological spectacle.

Your exercise confers superiority in two contests, one of longevity and the other of sex. Facing mortality, the gym-goer believes himself an agent of health—whereas he makes himself a more perfect patient. Facing the sexual struggle, the gym-goer labors to attain a positive advantage, which spurs an ever receding horizon of further competition.

The technical capabilities of gym exercise in fact drive social ideals and demands. The exerciser conforms, in our era's most virulent practice of conformism. But exercise itself pushes medicine and sexual allure toward further extremes. The feedback does not stabilize the system but radicalizes it, year by year. Only in a gym culture does overweight become the "second leading cause of death" (as the news reported this spring) rather than a correlation, a relative measure, which positively covaries with the heart attacks, the cancers, the organ failures and final illnesses that were formerly our killers. Only in a gym culture do physical traits that were formerly considered repellent become marks of sexual superiority. (We are hot now for the annihilation by exercise and dieting of once voluptuous feminine flesh, watching it be starved away in natural form and selectively replaced with breast implants, collagen injections, buttock lifts. We've learned to be aroused by the ripped, vein-popping muscles that make Incredible Hulks of men who actually push papers.) Because health and sex are the places we demand our truth today, newly minted ideals must be promulgated as discoveries of medical science or revelations of permanent, "evolutionary" human desires.

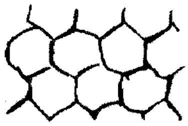
The consequences are not only the flooding of consciousness with a numbered and regulated body, or the distraction from living that comes with endless life-maintenance, but the liquidation of the last untouched spheres of privacy, such that biological life itself becomes a spectacle.

"You are condemned. You are condemned. You are condemned." This is the chant the machines make with their grinding rhythm, inside the roar of the gym floor. Once upon a time, the authority of health, and the display of our bodies and biological processes, seemed benign, even liberating. We were going to overcome illness, we were going to exorcise the prudish Victorians. But our arrows were turned from their targets, and some of them punctured our privacy.

THE THINNESS WE strive for becomes spiritual. This is not the future we wanted. That prickling beneath the exerciser's skin, as he steps off the treadmill, is only his new self, his reduced existence, scratching the truth of who he is now, from the inside out. +

UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE

NEW POETRY



Nets

Jen Bervin 0-9727684-3-2 | $10

"...Jen Bervin has reimagined Shakespeare as our true contemporary. Her little poems sing."

—*Paul Auster*

"...the most succesful advance over Tom Phillips' legendary discovery of undertexts in his *A Hummument*..."

—*Richard Kostelanetz*

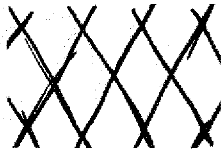
"...eye-widening...The reduction works even at its most extreme..."
—*Ed Park, The Village Voice*

Bending Spoons

Charlie Foos 0-97276846-7 | $8

Charlie Foos is a tattoo artist who also makes what Robert Morris has called "conceptual folk art." The poems in *Bending Spoons*, his first collection, foreshadow the end of culture.

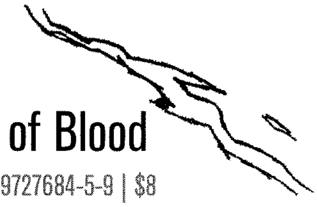
EASTERN EUROPEAN POETS SERIES



Poker

Tomaz Salamun 0-9727684-2-4 | $10
translated by Joshua Beckman with the author

Salamun's popular 1966 debut is finally available in an English translation. *Poker* was one of Small Press Distribution's fifty top-selling poetry books in 2003 and was a finalist for the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation.



Fifty Drops of Blood

Dmitri Prigov 0-9727684-5-9 | $8
translated by Christopher Mattison (bilingual edition)

"Dmitri Prigov re-imagines the blood of the poet within a startling series of conceptual vignettes that reveal the structures of adjacency and the possibilities of combination. Moscow's master of the art of words hits the American ground with leaps and bounds."

—*Charles Bernstein*

Catalogue of Comedic Novelties

Lev Rubinstein 0-9727684-4-0 | $11
translated by Philip Metres and Tatiana Tulchinsky

"Rubinstein's note-card poems...are an eye-opener! Their particular brand of conceptualism has affinities with our own Language poetry as well as with the French Oulipo, but its inflections are purely those of contemporary Russia. ... We can literally read between the lines and construct a world of great pathos, humor—and a resigned disillusionment that will strike a resonant chord among American readers."

—*Marjorie Perloff*

DISTRIBUTION

Small Press Distribution / spdbooks.org

ORDERING

uglyducklingpresse.org

See the online catalog for a full list of titles, including handbound chapbooks by Karen Weiser, Anthony Hawley, G.L.Ford, James Hoff, Mark Lamoureux, Aaron Tieger, Michael Ford, Genya Turovskaya, Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky, Sam Truitt and others. Free shipping.

Direct inquiries to udp_mailbox@yahoo.com

Cargo City, Germany. Ellie Ga, ©2003

THE NORM

Vladimir Sorokin

NORMA, WRITTEN IN the early 1980s, is the most radical fictional product of Sots-Art, the Russian version of Pop Art. Its style recreates the banal cheerfulness, faux-naturalism, and hard-boiled tone of official Soviet writing before utterly blowing it up. A remarkable work of anti-totalitarian fiction, it has never been translated into English.

The book opens with a preface: the writer Boris Gusev is arrested while going out to get his newspaper. He reacts bravely, refusing to answer questions while the KGB searches his apartment. They find the third volume of The Gulag Archipelago *("You gave the other two volumes to Feinstein the other night, is that correct?") and a 372-page manuscript of a novel called* Norma *("Recommended Daily Allowance," or "The Norm"). They immediately send the manuscript to headquarters, at Lyubyanka, where a 13-year-old boy is given the task of reading it. The text then follows.*

The first third of that text, Part I, follows—seven scenes are translated, the others are summarized in brackets.

SVEKLUSHIN ESCAPED FROM the crowded bus, adjusted his scarf, and marched rapidly down the sidewalk.

The wet asphalt was covered with fallen leaves, the wind blew at his back and nuzzled the bare branches of the poplar trees. Sveklushin raised his coat collar and ducked into a side street. But the side street soon ended, and Sveklushin crossed the avenue to a newspaper kiosk. Suddenly he received a tap on his shoulder.

"Hey, buddy!"

He turned around, and there was Trofimenko!

"Holy shit!" said Sveklushin, his eyebrows inching up his face. "Trof?"

"That's right!" Trofimenko brightly held out his hand.

"But, wait, wait, how did you get here? Where are you coming from?" Sveklushin shook the hand.

"From home, Sashuk! From home!"

"But, wait, holy shit, why didn't you call? Why didn't you come by?"

"I just got in. Right off the train. My baggage is in a locker."

"Wait. Wow. Are you in on business, or what?"

"Technically no, but actually yes. I'm looking for an apartment."

"Yeah? That *is* business. But look at you, holy shit! You look great. You been pigging out or what?"

"Yeah, right. No danger of that out there."

"But, wait, holy shit. And Nina?"

"What about her? She's a sweetheart. We're working, living. You know. Raising the kids. Sasha's two, Timka's almost eight."

"What? Timka? Holy shit! Just the other day I was throwing him in the air."

"Wouldn't be able to do that now. He's a real porker."

"Yeah, huh. Wait, Serezh, but tell me, how are things *really*? How's Pavel Yegorich? And Senya?"

"Ah, everything's fine. Pavel Yegorich is hanging in there."

"Head engineer?"

"Yup. But Senya's started drinking. Had some problems at work. His wife almost kicked him out."

"Holy—! What happened?"

"I don't know. He wasn't much of a drinker, either. Or not more than anybody else . . ."

"Yeah. That's something. Smart guy, too . . . Listen, let's sit down or something, we're standing here like two idiots . . . here."

They crossed the street and sat down on a bench near the side street.

Sveklushin looked at Trofimenko, shook his head quietly.

"Yeah . . . wow. Funny how we ran into each other. But you're a good one. No letters, no phonecalls . . ."

"Ah, Sash, that's not up to me. I'm away on business six months at a time. Just running around like crazy."

"Still. A couple of lines wouldn't kill you. 'I'm okay, everyone's healthy. Say hello to your parents for me.'"

"I wrote you."

"When?"

"I wrote you. I did. Come on."

"Ah, you!" Sveklushin laughed, slapped Trofimenko on the shoulder. "'I wrote,' he says!"

Trofimenko produced a pack of cigarettes.

"Want one?"

"Nah. No."

"Well, and how're things with you?"

Sveklushin sighed.

"Pretty much the same. Vera's finishing the aviation institute."

"In the evenings?"

"Yeah. And Serezha's in seventh grade."

"Grades?"

"So-so. He just can't seem to get down to work. Just wants to hang out, listen to the radio."

"Okay. And how's work? How's Sidorov been acting?"

"Shitty."

"He's coming down on you?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking of getting out. I'm sick of them."

"Where will you go?"

"I could go to the tech institute. Teach there."

"Technology?"

"Yeah."

"Well, why not? That's interesting too." Trofimenko kept smoking, adjusting his grip on the very tip of the cigarette.

"And the main thing is, it's nearby. In Cheremushki."

"Then it's God's will, practically. Do it."

Sveklushin placed his briefcase on his knees, smiled, sighed.

"Ah, Serezha, Serezha," he said. "Look at you. You're getting wrinkles."

"Yeah, and so? That's normal."

"What's normal about it? Black-belt in sambo, thirty-five years old."

"Yeah, well, you've got plenty of wrinkles yourself. So don't worry too much on my account. You'll give yourself a heart attack!"

They laughed.

Sveklushin slapped Trofimenko on the knee.

"Listen up, businessman. You get yourself to the train station, get your bags out of hock, and come on over. I'll give Verka a call, tell her to rustle something up for a big man from out of town. She's home already, you know. So get going."

Finished speaking, Sveklushin stood up, then remembered something.

"But wait. I'll take my norm first, no need to lug it home. Good thing I remembered."

He sat down and opened his briefcase.

Trofimenko smoked, shaking the ash onto the asphalt.

"Where . . . ah, there you are."

Sveklushin took out the neatly wrapped cellophane bag with the norm in it.

"Oh, wow." Trofimenko reached out for the package. "Look at that. We don't get them like this. They just put them in little paper bags. And the paper's real rough. But yours—look how carefully they did this. Even the typeface is nice. NORM."

"The capital's the capital," said Sveklushin. He tore open the packet, shook the norm onto his palm, pinched off a chunk and shoved it into his mouth.

Trofimenko touched the norm with his finger.

"It's so fresh . . . and soft. Ours is all dried out. Gets all crumbly. So-called 'organizers.' They can't organize shit."

"You should write someone, let them know." Sveklushin kept chewing, occasionally pinching off another chunk.

"Write!" Trofimenko threw down his cigarette and crushed it with his foot. "Don't make fun, Sasha."

"It wouldn't help?"

"Of course not. They couldn't care less. And then they say, 'Why aren't the provinces producing?' They've got to be kidding. It's just déjà vu every time. They keep trucking the norms in, they keep trucking them in, and inside they're lying there all dried up and stale. They could at least get the norms right. It's strange."

"Yeah, some things in this country are still pretty screwy." Sveklushin put the last piece of norm into his mouth, crumpled up the bag and was about to throw it in the trash when Trofimenko stopped him.

"Don't throw it out, give it to me. I'll show my wife."

He smoothed out the bag carefully and placed it in his pocket.

They got up.

Trofimenko straightened his cap, Sveklushin his scarf. They stood a moment looking each other over.

Trofimenko exhaled quickly through his nose. "Sash, what if a guy wanted to buy that coat. Is it hard?"

"No, not really, but it's Czechoslovakian. So it's a deficit item."

"But I can overpay if I need to. I have some money. What do you think?"

"We can try. Vera knows a lot of the salesgirls." Sveklushin shifted his briefcase to his left hand, sighed. "We'll try. But for now, you get yourself to the station, you hear? Get your stuff. You remember the address?"

"Are you nuts? Of course."

"Well, then, good. Run. Be at our place in half an hour, you got it?"

"Got it." Trofimenko smiled.

"Good. We'll be waiting." Sveklushin nodded, turned, and quickly marched toward home. Trofimenko smiled and watched him walk away.

RADUSHKEVICH LOWERED THE flame, and the cocoa's chocolate foam rose less quickly. As soon as it reached the rim of the little pot, he switched off the gas and began to stir the cocoa with a spoon.

"Dad, look," Sveta called from the other room, "they're showing the circus!"

Without answering, Radushkevich removed the pot from the stove and poured himself some cocoa, then sat down.

"Dad! Acrobats!"

He unsealed the norm, poured it into a cup, then took a can of eggplant salad from the refrigerator, opened it, and began to scoop it with a spoon onto the dried brick of norm.

"Dad! They're flying!"

Radushkevich used the spoon to mix the norm with the salad, then cut off some bread.

"Dad! There's three of them!"

He began to spread his mixture onto the bread.

"They're doing flips right in the air!"

In all, the mixture was enough for seven sandwiches.

Radushkevich stirred the cocoa, sipped at it, picked up the first sandwich, took a bite.

"This woman just went through his legs, Dad!"

"That's nice for her," said Radushkevich, in a barely audible murmur, as he slurped at the cocoa.

His paws knocking against the floor, Henry came up and stuck his black face into Radushkevich's knee.

Radushkevich gave him a lump of sugar.

Henry gnawed at it loudly, dropping pieces onto the floor, then picking them up. He licked himself and looked at his master.

[The day's final galleys arrive at the news-room. Olya, the office manager, distributes the pages. Tumakov helps out, and has to read more than his share because Morozov, who's friends with the editor-in-chief, has taken off early. But it's more time he gets to spend with Olya. After some reading, Olya gets up to stretch and checks on her norm. "All day I've been chewing at it, and chewing, I just can't seem to chew it to the end." Tumakov suggests she make the effort.]

YARTSEV WAS TEN minutes late—the clock on the silvery post nearby showed that it was past six.

Slavka and Sashka were waiting for him at the corner, near a shoe repair stall.

"Hey," said Yartsev, holding out his hand. "I got a little caught up . . ."

Slavka shook his hand wanly. "We started thinking you'd skip out again."

"Vit'ka the skip-out artist," scowled Sashka, taking Vitya's hand. "We salute you, Mr. Skipski. Always somewhere else to go. Say, why so businesslike? You wasted already?"

"Yup," said Vitya. "I'm in a bad way." He took out a pack of cigarettes, offered it around.

They smoked. Vitya exhaled, then spit.

"So?" he said. "Do I have to go get the stuff again?"

Slavka and Sashka laughed together.

"He's a businessman!"

"He gets things done! Look at him, there's smoke coming out of his ears!"

"What, you buy it already?" asked Vitya.

Slava shook his head reproachfully.

"Viktor Kuzmich," he said. "You don't think much of us, do you? You don't value us very much."

He opened his overcoat. A bottle of vodka peeked out from the inside pocket.

"Forgive me, Lord," Vitya giggled. "I knew not what I thought."

"That's more like it, Viktor Kuzmich. You should be more careful in the future. Let's see a bean and a half from you."

Vitya counted out the money and shoved it over to Slava.

"Where should we go?"

"Anywhere at all. Here, even."

"Let's go in back of the building."

"In the little square?"

"Yeah."

"All right."

They went around the corner, crossed a playground.

In the little square, two men were sharing a bottle of red wine, and another was asleep on the bench.

They walked past. Sashka nodded toward them.

"Fucking suicides."

They sat down on a bench.

Slavka opened the bottle. Sashka handed around some processed cheese.

"Now," Slavka said, flicking a cigarette butt off the bench. "Please do the honors, Sash."

Sashka drank from the bottle, then handed it to Vitya. Vitya raised it to his lips, then suddenly pulled away.

"Ah, fuck . . . I still have my norm. Here, Slav, you go first."

He handed Slavka the bottle, took the norm from his pocket, ripped open the packet.

"What the fuck?" Slavka looked at him in surprise.

"What? Nothing."

"You guys have to take it too?"

"Yeah. 150 each. You didn't know?"

"No," Slavka drank from the bottle. "Ekh. Why'd you decide to start?"

"Just decided is all." Vitya broke the norm in half and began eating it, biting from each of the halves in turn. "You'll decide too, one of these days."

"Fuck that," said Slavka, holding out the bottle to him. "Here."

Vitya finished the norm, then drank.

They each swallowed a piece of cheese.

Sashka threw the bottle into the bushes.

"Well fuck, Vityok," said Slava. He looked at his friend. "Be careful."

"Unbefuckinglievable." Sashka spit, stood up, and, dropping the tin-foil from the cheese, deftly kicked it with his foot.

The silvery little ball traced an arc in the air and disappeared into a pile of fallen leaves.

[Alexei Kirillovich's spoiled cat Sinus refuses to eat his sausage, apparently holding out for fish. "No fish," Alexei Kirillovich says. "Don't even think about it." Eventually he eats the sausage himself, makes some tea, goes into the living room to do some work (he is a physicist) and chew on his norm. He keeps Sinus updated on the progress of the work. Suddenly, he bites down on something hard. A button! "How about that . . . Sinus, someone swallowed a button. How'd he manage that?" Sinus scratches at the couch.]

[Teens Zhenya and Sergei find the guys who beat up Sergei, and beat them up; Zhenya's norm is damaged during the fight, gets all over his coat.]

"IT'S ALWAYS THAT way with them." Era cracked the seventh egg into the enamel bowl. "They make plenty of money, but they don't know how to live like normal people. So at the end of the month they come borrowing."

"I know." Anya was cracking almonds, removing them from their shells, and putting them in a cup.

"Mashka comes by, she's practically naked, just an amber necklace and a little slip. Era, she says, could you help me out? And she knows perfectly well I can't say no."

"Of course she does."

"She went to the Solovyovs' once, they said no. But me, I just can't do it. I can't say no."

Era tossed the shells into the wastebasket and started whipping sugar into the eggs.

"You're too good."

"I tell myself, don't be an idiot, who do you think you are? But I just can't. Whereas Mashka, she takes the hundred—no problem. See you later. The next day they have a party. All sorts of people. On pay day, she gives me half back, then at the end of the month, there she is again."

"Does he come by?"

"No, of course not. They're the Party elite, they're not going to condescend to visit a couple of engineers. Their guests are that way, too—bunch of snobs. All wrapped in leather and suede."

"Is he in the Union?"

"Long time. He's got a three-volume collected works coming out, Mashka said."

"Did you read it?"

"I read it. It's—it's just the dullest thing. An industrial novel. He loves her; she's on the factory committee; he's a foreman. He's having trouble meeting his quota. His crew's falling apart, people are quitting. She criticizes him. He thinks she fancies the head engineer. Of course it all works out. They surpass the quota, they get married. The tough old boss gives a toast at the wedding. The young workers clap. The end."

"Awful . . ."

"Yup, I barely finished it. He has a book of stories, too. It's, you know, village lyricism. Not bad, really, but how much can you take, you know? Enough already."

"Do I put the cream in now or later?"

"Later. Or it'll sink. Pass me the flour."

Anya handed her the sack of flour.

Era measured out two cups, poured them into the bowl, added some melted butter, and began stirring with a wooden spoon.

"Er, do I put the nuts in all at once or later? Do I put them on top?"

"No, no, all at once. That's the whole trick. It's not a 'Fancy.' Why don't you mix the nuts with the norm now."

Anya took a covered plate from the counter. On it lay four norms. Three were dark, but the other was very fresh, and orange-brown. Anya poured the nuts onto the norms and began mixing them all together.

"Er, where does Kolya's ministry get its norms?"

"The kindergarten."

"Yeah, you can tell. They're so light. We get the ones from the juvenile centers. They're not bad, but not like this . . . It still smells, though. Nothing you can do about the smell."

"We'll bake it, leave it awhile, and you'll see—no smell."

"Really?"

"Yup . . . Did you mix them in? I'll take that."

Anya handed over her plate. Era cleared the heavy mass off it and into her dough, added some flour, and began to roll up her sleeves.

[Important Soviet functionary comes home, discusses problems with grown-up daughter, takes his norm straight.]

[Young couple walks down street, buy wine, go home and have great sex—she goes to the kitchen, asks him to bring their norms—turns out she's his mistress—they cook up a nice omelet from their norms, discuss recipes. She says, "Only in this country would people think of just eating it straight." They eat the omelet, kiss, he picks her up . . .]

[Nikolai covers his norm entirely with jam; his father-in-law comes in, is disgusted. "You've turned it into a cupcake!" Starts criticizing Nikolai, until Nikolai grows angry and throws him out of the kitchen.]

THE PIGEONS FLED their puddle at the approach of the large truck, and flew over Kuperman's head.

The truck sprayed some water on the beat-up old Zaporozhets parked by the side of the road, and then disappeared behind the corner.

Kuperman moved along the shuttered market stalls. It had just stopped raining. The brightly sanded walls were still wet, and drops dripped from the slate rooftops. A few men crowded around a beer kiosk.

One of the startled pigeons circled above the kiosk and then landed on its roof. Kuperman turned, walked another hundred meters, and found himself at the river. The wet asphalt stretched around him, an occasional car passed in the evening light. The street was empty. Kuperman approached the cement parapet and, placing his elbows atop it, looked down.

The water was steel-gray; it would be dark out soon. A thin layer of slime lay atop the river.

Kuperman looked around. There was no one.

Rapidly he removed a handkerchief with his norm inside. He leaned further over the parapet and quietly let the norm fall into the water.

The brownish little brick plopped into the river, disappeared, then floated up again.

Kuperman looked around once more, blew his nose into the handkerchief, and, without hurrying, began to walk along the embankment.

A milk-truck passed, followed by two cars.

Kuperman turned down an alleyway, picked up a yellow maple leaf, and wandered along, rustling the wet autumn leaves with his boots.

A taxi stopped at the river, and a young couple stepped out.

He waved to the cab driver, who quickly turned his car around and left.

She climbed atop the parapet and stood to her full height. He took her hand.

"You'll fall off!"

"Don't worry."

Balancing, she moved along the parapet.

"Lyd, you're a real acrobat, you know that?" he said, laughing. "But this is your final act!"

"And my first." She removed her velvet cap and began to wave it around. "We ask that elderly persons and those with heart conditions please leave the arena . . ."

"The world's most amazing tight-rope walker! Dogs jumping through hoops, ladies and gentlemen, under the circus top! And on a wire, ladies and gentlemen, high in the air!"

The girl laughed, he grabbed her legs.

"You're about to go for a swim, get off."

She looked down, squinted. "Hey, what's that?"

The young man took her down from the parapet, then looked with her.

Floating down below, rubbing against the granite wall, was the buoyant norm.

"It's some sort of brick," she said.

"Wait. That's a norm!"

His face grew serious.

"How did it get there?" asked Lydia.

"I don't know. Maybe someone lost it."

"That can't be."

"Who knows? Or maybe some lowlife threw it in there."

"Really?"

"Why not! I read in the paper the other day—one guy was throwing them into trash cans on the street. He'd wrap them up in paper, then out they'd go."

"Geez. But listen, what if someone drowned?"

"How?"

"Just drowned! And the norm floated up!"

"No. Don't be silly."

He watched the norm.

"You know, we should get the police."

"Out here?"

"We drove by one back there at the intersection."

"Yeah, that's right. It's not far. Let's go."

"Just make sure we remember the spot."

The policeman was patrolling the intersection on the other side of the bridge. He wore a long, checkered poncho, with his traffic baton poking out.

The couple approached him, and the young man spoke first. "Comrade police officer, we were down there, over by the turn, and then we looked, in the water . . . someone's norm was floating in it."

"In the water?" asked the policeman.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? A norm?"

"We're sure, we're sure!" The girl nodded her head furiously. "We were walking, we looked in the water, there it was."

"Is it near the embankment?"

"It's right there, next to the wall."

"And it's floating."

"Yup."

"Well, look . . ."

The officer opened his poncho halfway and produced a microphone, attached to a long coiled wire.

"Sixth, come in, sixth . . . Sash, it's Savyolov from the eighteenth. Listen, I've got some kids here, they say they saw a norm in the water. Next to the alleyway, next to the turn to the market. It got washed up toward the wall. Yeah. Tell them at the station, they can send a boat."

He put the microphone away.

"Thanks, you two."

"Ah, it was nothing."

The couple walked away.

Five minutes later a motorboat puttered up the river, approached the embankment, and then moved slowly alongside it. The pilot was accompanied by a policeman.

They had some trouble finding the norm in the waning light. It had begun to break up into bits in the water.

The skipper carefully maneuvered the boat's nose against the wall as the policeman leaned out with a canvas sack, picked up the norm, and shook it out over the water.

"That's the fourth time in two days. Can you believe it?"

The pilot lit a cigarette, threw the match overboard, and began to move away from the embankment and turn around.

"Did they find the guy?"

"We'll find him," the police officer nodded swiftly as he transferred the norm to a paper bag. "We'll find him alright."

[Yulia comes home to little Vova. He's so excited! Did she bring the ice cream? No, better, she brought cupcakes. She makes dinner, puts her norm on a plate. "Mom," asks Vova, "why do you eat doo-doo?" "It's not doo-doo. Don't talk nonsense. How many times have I told you?" "But why?" "Because." "Mom, tell me! It doesn't taste good. I tried. And it smells like doo-doo." "What did I tell you! Cut it out!"]

[Prokhorov fixes his coffeemaker; sticks cotton balls up his nose, covers his norm with ground pepper, and tries to swallow it all without chewing. He turns on the television as he does so and watches angrily as a crowd erupts with laughter over the antics of a circus clown.]

[Three grad-student physicists go camping, discuss their physics projects. Beer, sandwiches, salted fish, everything's great. No one's around, so they consider throwing out their norms, then decide, what the heck: split one in three, throw the other two away. A bird comes over, they toss it some bread and the norms. It takes the bread and flies away.]

ALYOSHA COVERED THE buzzer with his hand.

"Who is it?" inquired a female voice, cautiously, from behind the door.

"It's me. Klav, open up." He tried to lean on the frame but his arms slipped, so that he ended up swaying with his head against the door, balancing against it.

"God, you're drunk. It's past midnight. I'm not letting you in."

Klava's voice trailed off.

"What? No. Baby, no." Alyosha grabbed the door handle. "It's me. Alyosha. Just me, baby."

There was no answer from behind the door.

Alyosha backed off and slapped the buzzer.

"Klav! That's enough! What're you doing? Klav. Baby. Open up."

The door was silent.

"Open up, you hear me?!" Alyosha banged his fist against the door, just below the apartment number. "Open up! You hear me?"

"You hear me? Klav!"

"Open up! You hear me!"

"You hear me? Klavka!"

"Open up! Klavka!"

"You hear me! Klav!"

"Klav! Klav! Klav!"

His voice echoed, hollow, through the entryway.

Klava made no answer.

Alyosha kept ringing and ringing, with occasional pauses.

Then he hammered on the door.

"Open up, you bitch! Open it! Open it you fucking slut!"

"I'm talking to you! Open the door!"

"Open! Klavka! No joke!"

"Open it! Open, you!"

"Klavka! You hear me? Open the door!"

"Open it or I'll kill you! Klav!"

He backed away for a running start, but his foot snagged on something and his legs crumpled beneath him. Alyosha collapsed onto the stairs.

"Oh, fuck . . ."

The neighbors' door cracked open and for a second a face appeared in it. Then disappeared again.

Alyosha staggered uncertainly, made it to the door, and kicked it with all his might.

"Open up! Listen!"

"Open it, Klav."

"Open it!"

"You hear me? Open the door!"

He kicked the door again and again, barely keeping his balance.

Then he sat down on the little doormat.

"Open up . . . you hear? Klav. Come on."

"You hear? . . . Hear?"

"Klav . . . open up . . ."

"Klav . . . what'd I do?"

"Klav . . . Klavka . . ."

"Klav . . . open up . . . open the door . . . open the door you bitch!!!"

He stood, dirtying his hands on the doorjamb, backed up again and threw himself on the door.

"I'll kill you, you slut! Bitch! I'll kill you! Open the fucking door!!!"

Klava came out an hour and a half later. Alyosha was curled up before the door, asleep. Klava got him into the dark hallway, closed the door, and, holding him under the arms, dragged him toward their room.

"Oh God . . . drunk again . . . God . . . How could you? . . . Bastard . . . How much longer can I take this . . ."

She yanked off his dirty boots, carried them into the hallway. Returning, she dumped Alyosha out of his overcoat. Small coins rang out as they dropped from his pockets to the floor. Klava went through the overcoat, removed a few crumpled bills, and then felt something soft, wrapped in cellophane, in the inside pocket.

"Oh, God, the norm . . . God . . ."

She placed the norm on the table. The remaining money she put in a drawer underneath the linen.

Alyosha mumbled something, turned over.

Klava pulled off his mud-stained pants, his jacket and shirt. She dragged him onto the bed, put him on his back, and covered him with the blanket. She went over to Vovka, lying on the cot, and straightened his sheets. Then, yawning, she took off her robe and lay down next to her husband.

ALYOSHA AWOKE A little after five, got up, wandered over to the bathroom. After taking a messy leak, he turned on the faucet and put his dried-up lips to the stream. He drank for some time. Then he plunged his head under the water, made a neighing sound, and returned to the room, dripping water from his hair. He sat down on the bed and shook his head.

Klava turned to him.

"Lyosh, is that you? Listen, the norm's over there, you forgot to eat yesterday's . . ."

"The norm?"

"Yeah. It was in your pocket. In the coat. It's on the table."

"Wha?"

"What what?? Norm! The norm!" His wife was hissing. "You didn't take your norm!"

"How?"

"That's how. It's sitting over there."

Alyosha stood up, felt for the packet on the table.

"Ah fuck," he said. "How'd that . . . how did I . . ."

"You got drunk, that's how. Just take it now and go back to sleep. We have to be up by seven."

Alyosha turned the packet over dully in his hands. The streetlight outside their window was reflected, piecemeal, in the cellophane bag.

He sat down on the bed again, tore open the packet, and began to chew the norm.

"Who were you with, huh?" asked Klava. "With Fedya? Or who? Huh?"

"None of your business." Alyosha's thin jaw moved back and forth without enthusiasm.

"Sure it's not," said Klava. "I just have to clean your filthy pants and wait to make sure your boots aren't ruined."

"All right. Shut up. Go to sleep."

"Shut up yourself. Alcoholic."

Klava turned over to face the wall.

Alyosha finished chewing the norm, looked at his dirtied hands. He got up and stumbled into the kitchen. He sucked at the spout of the teakettle and wiped his hands on his underwear. He approached the window and looked out over the sleeping houses. He scratched his chest.

In the building across the way, a window exploded with light on the sixth floor. And then another window nearby did the same.

Alyosha flung the drops of water from his forehead. He sniffed his hands.

He wiped them again on his underwear and went back to get some sleep.

[Fedor Ivanovich teaches Kolya how to eat his norm. "This stuff's butter compared to what we used to eat. I tell you!" Kolya tries it, it's disgusting. "It's got a strange taste." "Not a strange taste, a normal taste . . . You'll get used to it."]

[Ludmila Ivanovna leads a group of nineteen kindergartners to a room on the second floor. She tries to keep them in order. In the room, they are to sit down and shit.

Some have trouble, Alekseev especially. "Ludmila Ivanovna, I only peed." "Now make doo-doo." "But I can't. I can't pee and make doo-doo. I either pee or make doo-doo." "Nonsense. Sit back down." "But I won't make doo-doo." "You just try." All the children defecate and are allowed to go back downstairs, but poor Alekseev proves true to his word. The teacher asks him about his mother, who works at the airport. (Might she be useful?) Finally: "Alekseev! How much longer must we wait?" "But I don't want to make doo-doo." "Then you won't be allowed to draw today." "I don't want to draw either." Ludmilla Ivanovna gives up, releases him.]

[Marina and Vika, two lesbians, hang out naked and talk dirty. Vika is very beautiful, but she's not feeling it today. They go to the kitchen, where Marina, it turns out, has this contraption over the sink. What is it? It's for processing the norm, taking away the smell. Wow. Marina's grandfather invented it. "But it's true what they say," asks Vika, "that it's shit?" "Shit is shit," Marina agrees, "you can't do anything about that." Vika's never tried the norm, whereas Marina's been taking it for twelve years. Vika, it turns out, sells juice at a kiosk, Marina teaches at Moscow University. The ingenious machine turns Vika on—finally!—and the two leave the kitchen to play.]

[Ludmila Ivanovna comes home from work, has a phone conversation with her lover, takes her norm with some soup.]

[Samoteev is exhibiting his paintings. His old rival Barvitskiy comes to look. Samoteev is excited—will Barvitsky finally acknowledge his talent?—and indeed Barvitskiy brings him some flowers. But, wait: they're plastic! Samoteev is furious. "Your paintings belong in the Louvre!" yells Barvitsky, running out. "Have you ordered the gold frames yet? Have you drawn the farm machinery yet? Phony!" Later on, Samoteev eats his norm with his students, says Barvitsky has always been jealous of him. He's not quite "normal."]

[Giorgy is asking Aunt Katya about the wartime exploits of the heroic Aunt Natasha, who was a sniper in the Red Army. Can he see her medals? Why not; Aunt Katya takes him to the little treasure trove. Among the medals and letters, a little packet. "Norm," it says. That's Serezha's. He loved Aunt Natasha, but was killed at Stalingrad. She took his last norm home with her. Can Giorgy try a piece, see how it tastes? Okay. He does. It tastes a little funny. Those were different times.]

[Denisov can't stand the smell of the norm. "Open a window, would you?" he says to his wife. Finally he goes ahead and sticks it in his mouth—and vomits. "Now what?" his wife wants to know. Denisov couldn't care less, she can throw it away if she wants. He goes to watch some television. She cleans up, washes off the norm, and brings it into the living room on a plate. Denisov laughs at something on the television. Then, as he watches TV, he begins to pick at the norm, bit by bit.]

[Novitsky and Akkuratov have an intense, high-level discussion of Picasso and Matisse and Duchamp. They are drinking tea and eating their norms with teaspoons. Novitsky finishes a complex, subtle point, then suddenly makes a face, starts pulling something out of his mouth—an incredibly long hair was in his norm. "Ariadne's thread," he jokes, pulling it out.]

[Vas'ka and Milok call up some girls, hoping to hook up. The girls say, "Tomorrow." The boys console themselves by discussing the girls' willingness to do anything*. Really anything. Then they eat their norms, evaluating their relative quality.]*

[The students Anya and Vasily talk about the theater. Vasily makes cutting remarks about the Taganka as he chews his norm.]

[A taxi driver is taking Rabbit to a far-away village. "Where is it?" asks the driver. Rabbit hits him with a rock. And again. And again. Throws him out of the car. Takes his money, but chucks his glasses and his passport. Finds the driver's norm. Sniffs it. Disgusting. Tosses it out the window. Takes the car back to Moscow.]

[Kulikov's novel is being criticized by Alexei Mikhailovich, his editor, who thinks that the protagonist should report his troubles to the local party committee as soon as he learns of them. Kurilov argues that this would mess up the plot. They compromise. Then, as Alexei Mikhailovich takes out his norm, they reminisce about how Tvardovsky, the legendary 1960s Novy Mir *editor, the publisher of Solzhenitsyn, used to take his—at work, washed down with shots of vodka.]*

[Three chess masters analyze the position that Kalmanovich has found himself in, in the tournament. Elaborate discussion. Finally they take their norms—they almost forgot! The two old masters have full norms, while Kalmanovich has a smaller ("grad-student") one. Is it true, asks Kalmanovich, that the famous chess-master Botvinnik,

when he went to London for a tournament, produced his own norm? Yes, it's true. Wow, says Kalmanovich.]

[An old Komsomol secretary comes back to visit the old school. Chats with his friend and successor as KomSec. Student-gov phonies! A bit ostentatiously, perhaps, the alum takes out his norm and eats it.]

[Mikhail and his mom go through the newspaper to see whether they can get money for their old government bonds. There's a chart in the paper. They go through it, figure they can recover fifty rubles, for now. So little! Why don't they just honor all the 1950 bonds at once? "Ah, Mom, this whole country has its head up its ass." Then Mikhail's mom asks whether he's going to have his norm, it's been sitting there two days, he hasn't touched it.]

"NURSE!" CALLED A voice through the open door.

Reluctantly, Zoya stood up.

Klava was sipping tea next to her.

"What's he yelling for? Is the buzzer broken again?"

"No. It's the one who lost his arms."

"Oh."

Thrusting her hands into the pockets of her narrow white nurse's robe, Zoya walked down the corridor to the patient. Krayuhin lay in the half-dark; he'd placed his bandaged stumps atop the blanket.

"What's the matter?" Zoya asked quietly.

"Nurse . . . I . . . need to . . ."

"You want the bedpan?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

Bending over, Zoya took the plastic container from beneath the bed and placed it under the blanket.

Krayuhin adjusted his position.

"I'll be back in five minutes."

Zoya left, closing the door of the next room.

Klava was sipping her tea and reading, half-reclining on the cot.

Yawning, Zoya set herself down on a chair.

"Klav, I can't remember. Did we give Sedoy his shot?"

"Of course we did."

"Okay. It's all mixed up in my head."

"Tired?"

"A little bit."

"Well, lie down and have a nap. I'll sit for a while."

Klava got up. Zoya lay down on the cot, moaning a little, and stretching. "Oooh, God . . . don't forget, the bedpan, he's got . . . that one . . ."

"The one who lost his arms?"

"Right."

"Should I go now?"

"Yeah, go. I just gave it to him."

"Listen, Zoy, how'd he do it?"

"His arms?"

"Yeah."

"He was working on a construction site. He's a carpenter, I think. So he's carrying these boards with another guy on the fifth floor. A bunch of boards. And they could either walk around on the scaffolding, or cut through on the wall. They took the wall."

"He told you this?"

"No, Glickman told me. So. They're walking and . . . ooouuaaa." Zoya yawned. "And someone misstepped. They fell from the fifth floor. His friend let go of the boards and went straight down. Died right away. But this one sort of instinctively held onto the boards and went down with them. And they spread out, like a fan. So it's like he had a parachute. Just sprained his knee."

"And his hands?"

"His hands. When he landed, the boards all folded up from the impact, like a pair of scissors. And the hands were inside them. They got cut clear off."

"Wow. Least the rest of him's there."

"Sure. And he's got his own room, too. Almost paradise."

"His neighbor got transferred?"

"No, they checked him out yesterday . . . So, Klav, I'm going to nap a little."

"Sure."

Klava got up, went over to Krayuhin's room, looked in.

"So? Can I take it?"

"Yes," Krayuhin answered weakly.

Klava put her hand under the cover, felt for the warm vessel, and removed it. There was a bit of yellow urine at the bottom.

Klava headed for the door, but Krayuhin raised his head from the pillow.

"Nurse . . . I just remembered . . ."

"What?"

"In my pants, in the pocket, there was . . ."

"What?"

"My norm. We got it just before we . . . And it's still there . . ."

"Okay, and?"

"Well, I have to eat it."

"Now?"

"Well, why not? I've already missed two days. And I just remembered just now."

"So, what? You want me to bring it?"

"Please."

"What's your last name?"

"Krayuhin."

Holding the bedpan before her, Klava walked out.

Having dumped its contents into the toilet, she returned the container to its spot under Krayuhin's bed, and then, walking down the corridor past the sleeping Zoya, she took the key to the locker room off the wall.

Zoya sighed and smiled in her sleep.

On the first floor, Klava walked past two nurses asleep in the corridor, opened the locked room, and turned on the light.

Three mice jumped off a desk and hurried underneath the lockers.

Klava opened one of the desk's drawers and removed a swollen account book. She sat down on a rickety chair.

"Krayuhin . . . two days ago . . . let's see . . . Krayuhin . . . where . . ." She turned the brown pages. "There. Ninety-seven."

She went over to locker number ninety-seven and opened it. A torn-up cotton sweater hung on the nail, covered in dried mud and blood. Next to it hung a pair of cotton pants. Two mud-caked boots stood at the bottom of the locker.

Klava thrust her hand into the pants' pocket and immediately felt the norm packet. She pulled it out. The norm had been seriously squished.

Klava returned the account book to the drawer, turned off the light, left the room, locked the door. One of the sleeping nurses raised her head.

"Klav, is that you?"

"It's me. Don't worry, sleep."

"I thought someone was ringing," mumbled the nurse.

Swinging the key and the norm, Klava went back up the stairs.

Zoya was no longer on the cot.

Klava went into the room where the man with no arms was.

He was still lying on his back. Klava waved the bag at him.

"Found it."

"That's good."

"Should I leave it for you?"

"Sure, leave it . . . except . . . how am I . . . how . . . I don't . . . how am I going to eat it?" His voice broke.

"Don't worry." Klava sat down on the edge of his bed. "Our doctors make these great prosthetic limbs now. Just like real hands. You should be glad you're alive. Your buddy died, yeah?"

"Grisha. Yeah. Got smashed up real bad, they told me. And here I am in one piece."

"There you go. And as for the norm, I'll help you with it."

She tore open the packet and, breaking off a bite of the dried-up norm, held it out to Krayuhin. He opened his mouth, took the piece, and began chewing.

"So don't you lose heart. In my opinion, it's better to lose your hands than your legs. Just put on the prosthetics, and that's that. And no crutches or anything . . ."

She put another piece into his mouth.

Krayuhin chewed it silently.

Zoya came in.

"There you are. They woke me up, the devils."

"Who?"

"Yakushin. He started yelling like a lunatic."

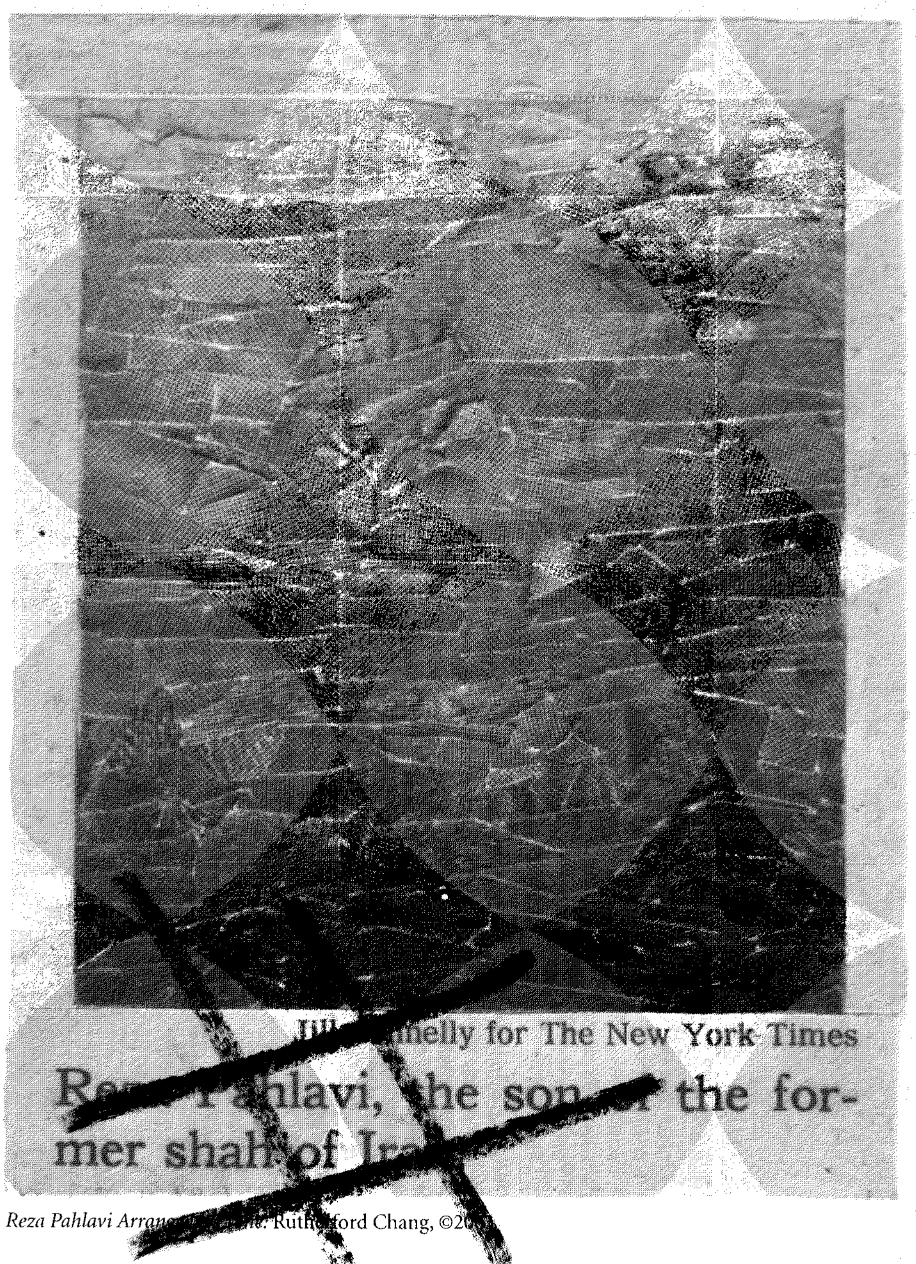
"I didn't hear it. I was down in the clothes room."

"You're lucky you didn't hear."

"Did you give him a shot?"

"Yup. He's sleeping like a baby." +

Translated from the Russian by Keith Gessen



Jill … nelly for The New York Times
Re… Pahlavi, the son … the for-
mer shah of Ira…

Reza Pahlavi Arran[illegible]*nt.* Rutherford Chang, ©20[illegible]

WHY LITERATURE MATTERS WHEN IT'S SOMEWHERE ELSE

Marco Roth

Reading has always been double-edged. One of the first things we learn how to do, it is bound up with our relations to the institutions that mark our lives: family, school, a well-paying job. It is also one of the few things we do alone and for ourselves. It's an acknowledged pleasure but the most complex of pleasures. Motives for reading may be as high or as low as any human action and can be qualified in myriad ways: we read for pleasure or power, to escape, to impress, to master, to have our security violated, to impose our will silently, to justify ourselves to ourselves or to be shaken, to find consolation for the injustice of the world in a story where virtue is rewarded. We may read with jaded distance or with too much closeness.

All these motives need to be taken into account when we consider the popularity of a book. Publishers do market research but we can never be sure what raises a book onto the best-seller lists. There are reasons to be suspicious of what people tell an interviewer, or reply to a survey when they are asked to rank their preferences rationally. If we can fool ourselves about how we read and why, why not fool others? Consider, as a case study, the phenomenon of *Reading Lolita in Tehran.* Last year, everyone seemed to be reading it. Azar Nafisi's memoir of her years as an English professor in Iran describes the contraband culture of American literature that existed among a dwindling group of middle-class and educated Iranian women during the mid-nineties. Slowly driven from the universities by a bizarre array of disciplinary measures, teacher and students met discreetly to discuss *Lolita*, *Daisy Miller*, *The Great Gatsby*, and other novels they had first studied in courses and then reread in xeroxed pamphlets (imports of foreign books were forbidden). Around pastries and coffee, shedding their veils and shapeless black clothes, they worried that their sessions might be reported to the police or that their parents, brothers, or husbands might disapprove and confine them to the house.

There are obvious reasons why a large number of Americans ought to be interested in such a tale. It confirms our sense of the importance of American culture to those who suffer from tyranny abroad. Our feelings of patriotism are aroused. One can imagine a high school course in which the teacher believes it his duty to impart a lesson about modern American civic values through *Reading Lolita.* Women who here might be corporate lawyers, teachers, or musicians are, in Iran, confined to their homes and their minds. This is injustice. There should be no accommodation with the Iranian regime. It is part of the book's function to arouse this feeling in its non-Iranian readers. Although Nafisi does not insist on Nabokov as an anticommunist author, her choice of him solidifes the tenuous mental connections between our fight against the Soviet Union and our current two-front battle against both Sunni and Shiite theocracy. *Reading Lolita* becomes a kind of *Darkness at Noon* or *1984* for our time.

A memoir is not propaganda, however. We can imagine a better course, taught at the college level, which takes the book as a document and object of interest for the burgeoning field of transnational studies. "Transnationalism," like globalization, implies a dissolution of national boundaries as the context in which literary meanings and judgments of value can be made. Ideally, the field of transnational studies serves as a corrective to the influence of the old blood-and-soil nationalists who founded most literature departments. In its best form, it can teach us about hidden influences. Did you know that medieval French poetry is actually a mix of Provençal and Bedouin love lyric imported by ninth-century Moorish invaders and further strengthened by cross-cultural encounters during the Crusades? But not everyone has the language skills and background for such work. As a result, most transnationalists study the uses of English and American literature in other non-English-speaking cultures. For these people, a memoir about Iranian women reading Nabokov, Fitzgerald, and Henry James will be a key text in the years to come.

To most American readers, after the canon wars of the eighties, the idea that such authors would be part of a subversive feminist circle, or that they have dangerous liberatory potential, seems quaint. Why not our powerful arsenal of books of women's liberation: Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, or even Erica Jong? Long considered to be part of a "high modernist" tradition of mandarin aestheticism, are James and Nabokov really the American culture that will rescue Persia from fundamentalism? Neither writer is even typically American; James emigrated, Nabokov immigrated and then emigrated as soon as he could. Neither were ardent defenders of America, capitalism, or liberalism.

To the transnationalist, the apparent inappropriateness of these texts is precisely the point. We cannot tell what happens to the meaning or value of a work when it crosses borders. Now that we must think of everything strategically, as part of America's great game, there is an obvious political conclusion to be drawn—America works best as an absent force, a shadow of an idea of liberty that is itself unseen. It is an idea that allows others to imagine the America of their dreams—without having the American dream imposed on them. Unmoored from the weight of historical contexts and considerations of authorial intention and biography, American literature takes on a value distinct from the climate in which it was created.

Nafisi catalogues two kinds of responses. Many of the young men in her earliest, coed university classes insist on reading through the imagined eyes of older authority figures, in their case, the Khomeini mullahs. Imitating the censorship they witness in daily life, one of them says about *Gatsby*, "The one good thing about this book is that it exposes the immorality and decadence of American society, but we have fought to rid ourselves of this trash and it is high time that such books be banned." Another student, Mr. Bahri, more intelligently wishes for a great Iranian national writer to rival Mark Twain but settles for spying on women students to make sure they behave properly.

The women become much better readers than the men because they have to make sense of what's happened to them. Less concerned with moral judgments about art works, they learn to make use of the novels they read to articulate their position in Iranian society. Their response to *Lolita* seems strange at first. The star of the book, after all, is Humbert Humbert's "fancy prose style." There is very little of the character Lolita that appears except through the filter of Humbert's impassioned apology. And then you realize that these girls take the form of the novel—the confessions of Humbert Humbert, romantic, kidnapper, and murderer—to be an extended metaphor that suddenly allows them to articulate their lives.

These women understand that they have been reduced to objects, fantasy playthings. They are not seen as they are, but as the mullahs wish them to be, and any deviation from the ideal is punished, not always overtly, but often by the simple sense of guilt. For Nafisi, "Lolita's image is forever associated in the minds of her readers with that of her jailer. Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars." One of the women coins the term "solipsization" to describe how Lolita is transformed from independent little girl into an exclusive possession of nasty old HH, and Nafisi applies the term to the mullah's treatment of her students. Jealousy, in plain English, would do just as well. As with all jealousy, meaning runs rampant, and all meanings point to the illicit and to betrayal. A flash of eyes above a veil, a gesture of the hand, the sound of a woman's laughter are all signs to be ferociously interpreted by men who, pleasure-starved themselves, seek out signs of enjoyment in order to punish it. A mixed party can be broken up by "morality police," the women hauled off to jail and treated like prostitutes. Just as Humbert wishes Lolita to remain daddy's little girl, the fantasy Muslim family of chaste obedient wives and daughters and strict surveying husbands and fathers has become the basis of Iranian political order.

Nafisi's choice of James and Nabokov over the Western feminist canon becomes clearer in this light. In the stories she chooses, the reader does not get the passive pleasure of identifying with a striving, female subject, whether authorial voice or character, but she must read against the grain of the narrative in order to counter the ways that the women are judged or appropriated by other characters. This is not reading as a form of identity politics or "empowerment." It is a survival strategy. Nafisi continually, perhaps unconsciously, seizes on books where female protagonists are misjudged or subject to overbearing influences. Within these, she concentrates on emblematic scenes which break open the tight container of spectacle, appearance, and plot. These scenes are primarily errors of recognition, like Humbert mistaking a butterfly for a moth, or Winterbourne failing to understand how Daisy could be out with a man at night in the ruins of the Coliseum. By dwelling on such scenes, Nafisi suggests that the value of these novels comes from the opportunities they give their readers to correct the misperceptions of the characters through their own triumphant recognition of the truth.

On the level of plot, however, the novels Nafisi cherishes are tragedies. *Gatsby*, *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Washington Square* are marked by truncated lives and failed escapes. The more conservative male students, their brutishness masking a perverted sentimentality, want all ends to be happy ones; they struggle to turn the fate of the victims into poetic justice. "Daisy Miller is evil and deserved to die," says one student at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. He backs up his claim by suggesting that Iranians know evil because they are in a war against it.

The unhappy endings of novels are important for the women, too. They are not disappointed by them; these are, after all, what they expect. Nafisi refers to the remnant of the Iranian intelligentsia as "perfectly equipped failures" and laments her own irrelevance as Iranian society moves on without women or literature. But such laments are not without pride. Although she recognizes an echo of her life in the dead-ends of the novels she teaches, this very recognition permits a small sense of triumph. By sharing the lives of the characters they discuss, Nafisi and her students believe that they will not share their fates. This gives them an ironic consciousness of tyranny; they laugh at the regime's obvious absurdities, like the appointment of a blind film censor, or the sight of bearded men playing the role of heckling mothers: "Are you really going out in that?"

Faced with a public life that combines tragedy and farce, the places of retreat and minimal privacy the women win for themselves are important but not enough. Like fairy-tale magicians they have learned how to place the beating heart of their lives into secret boxes while their bodies walk around exposed to danger. These boxes are their books, and an optimistic reader feels the interaction between Iranian women and American books as a new utopian literary space—neither in Tehran nor out of it. It may still be a kind of hell, and the intellectual freedom gained should not be confused with political freedom, but it is a necessary first step toward it.

SUCH A READING of the book, even on the heightened and remote plane of academic study, would still be an instrumentalist one. The nationalists and the transnationalists have this much in common: they are linked by the American imperial project. Facing a struggle to justify their existence to increasingly service-oriented administrators and consumerist undergraduates for whom a calculus of immediate utility and investment return through preprofessional training has replaced the traditional "Liberal Arts" emphases on well-roundedness, open-mindedness, creativity, and cultural literacy, literature departments have tried to get their share of funding from government grants to universities which promote the study of Islamic cultures as a vital national security interest.* In such an atmosphere, despite the best intentions of transnationalist scholars, *Lolita in Tehran* risks becoming a merely accessible introduction to the Persian mind, a guide by a native informant to the reading psychology of Iranians.

Transnationalism, however, goes both ways. Just as the tale of an erudite, cosmopolitan pedophile set down in fifties America becomes a means of displaced recognition for Nafisi and her students, our reading of her book should allow us a similar experience of recognition. This will happen only if we allow ourselves to read it as something more than documentary evidence of how badly and absurdly Iranians treat their women—as a description of a culture of reading much like our own.

---

* "The conferees find that our national security, stability and economic vitality depend, in part, on American experts who have sophisticated language skills and cultural knowledge about the various areas of the world. An urgent need exists to enhance the nation's in-depth knowledge of world areas and transnational issues, and fluency of U.S. citizens in languages relevant to understanding societies where Islamic and/or Muslim culture, politics, religion and economy are a significant factor." (Spring 2002 Congressional Conference report for the Appropriations Act.)

Nafisi reminds us that governments are like authors; they impose a narrative on society. The Iranian censors, like all prosecutors of art since Plato, do literature the courtesy of taking it seriously. They see themselves in competition with other people's stories, and they are right that Nabokov and Henry James pose a threat because they undermine the stories the state wishes its citizens to believe. Reading is not always a properly social and institutional activity. Our responses will not always align with the wishes of the majority or the government.

And perhaps *Reading Lolita* might also be a little dangerous for us. This book's popularity clearly went beyond the two possible audiences indicated above—there might be plenty of nationalists, but there aren't so many transnationalists. What effect would Nafisi's book have on readers without overt ideological interests? Might they echo the question asked by one of Nafisi's students as she reaches for a pastry, "Why is it that stories that are so sad, so tragic make us happy? Is it not sinful to feel pleasure when reading about something so terrible?" Perhaps too, and most dangerously, they would feel something like envy or longing. The novels and memoirs they consume for pleasure, "to warm their shivering lives with the deaths they read about," as Walter Benjamin wrote, are as important to these Iranians as oxygen.

You can imagine the essay "We Are All Iranian Women Now." We are not. We must, however, allow ourselves the fantasy that reading may be as heroic an act to us as it is to them. This fantasy is in many ways an anti-social gesture. We would deny that we were ourselves: the bored commuter, the book-club member, the journal editor, the teacher, the American citizen. Temporarily, we would dissolve our links and allegiances with the world we know to be ours. To read urgently, in this way, is to be placed in an ethical relation to the book itself and to its characters that carries us outside the everyday and yet back to our lives and the lives of others closest to us. To condemn a character thoughtlessly would be like sanctioning the death of a friend, or doing violence to ourselves. The characters become participants in our own lives, like daimons whispering in our ears, and the field of real-life relations available to us expands because of the characters whose company we've kept while shut away in the privacy of our reading space.

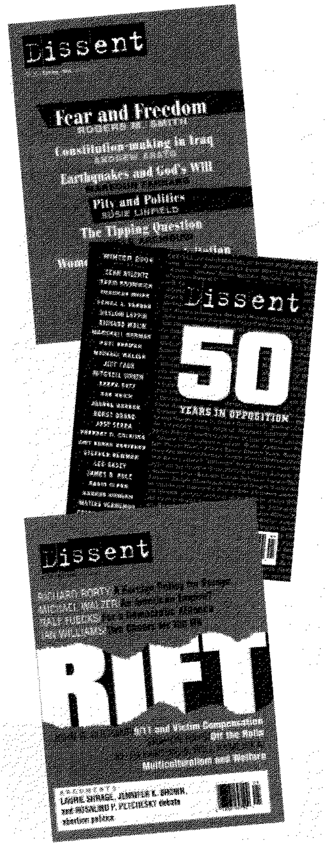
As anti-social acts go, this kind of refined, intensive reading seems an innocuous and relatively powerless one. Still, Americans have shown a remarkable capacity to absorb other, more blatant forms of anti-social behavior into the fabric of our culture and transform their fury into harmless group activities: the frenzy of the solitary dancer is diffused in the rave; no longer alone, the poet reads to other poets at poetry slams; and sex, the great promise of happiness that was going to emancipate us from all forms of narrow-mindedness, has become repressive in its conspicuousness. There are few narratives of rebellion into which we can plot our lives, especially since our governing narrative encourages us to think of ourselves as surrounded by boundless opportunities. Yet the outlaw feeling, ghostlike, is still present. Despite all the ways our reading habits are conditioned and straightened by the institutions in which we read, simple reading may be the last unsocialized action left to us.

THIS IS NOT to say that merely sitting down with a novel is subversive in any way. Our cultural age is too old for that sort of thing. Even the word "reading" is now generally applied to all kinds of signs from films to body language. Some even talk now of post-verbal reading. To let this go unchallenged is also a mistake. There are limits to what we can read in daily life.

America is not yet a finished country. We don't know who we are or what we will become. Our ecstasies of self-congratulation should not deceive us on this score. That we are permitted to display much more of ourselves than Iranians doesn't mean that we are only what our surfaces show. In the café where I'm reading, the girl sitting at the table opposite has got herself up in punk gamine. Slender, perhaps emaciated, and fine featured, she could be sixteen or thirty. She wears a leopard print shirt, tight-fitting at the chest with long flowing sleeves over a fairly modest lower-thigh black mini, and—cute touch—furry leg warmers rising above red Puma sneakers. A tattoo of vaguely Celtic design snakes out of the top of one legwarmer and behind her knee. She notices I'm looking at her and gives a cold look back at the guy in button-down shirt and jeans. Her glasses are of an ugliness I find touching, thick rusty plastic frames lacking only masking tape over the earpiece. She has pierced her septum and a bull ring dangles from it. A great deal has gone into this outfit and I wonder what it means. The legwarmer is back, an ironic homage to the Reagan years (to which we've returned with the woozy feeling of a late-night rerun). But that tattoo and the nose ring place her beyond merely trendy opposition into a long-established cult of pain and boredom. I imagine she might be looking for a way to master her anger, her fear. She wants us to know that she feels herself a freak, and her look urges the rest of us to admit it honestly. It says, we are all monsters and most of us are masochists, I've gone about my pain and self-mutilation more honestly than you who wear it on the inside, covered up by that casual uniform. My monstrosity is my health, your bodily integrity your sickness.

Of course I'm reading, and I may be entirely wrong. Her punk guise perhaps expresses nothing but fealty, a badge of membership in the particular club of outsiders in which she's the perfect insider. There's no message for me except a sign that says private property, keep out, this is how I dress. I have smacked right up against the double-bind in which the American culture of total permissiveness places the imagination. To live in America with eyes open is to be a cultural anthropologist and an amateur enthusiast of surfaces. Clothes are signs, but what they signify may be utterly meaningless or hopelessly overdetermined. What began as expressionism, wearing oneself on the outside, has become expressionlessness, a mask that gives nothing away. The punk gamine is on display but it is not a display for my enjoyment. For all I know of her inner life, she might as well be wearing a Hijab.

After all, beneath the ever shifting play of choices and all the vast array of selves presented in everyday life we still do have inner lives, psychodramas, and stories. Even in our free society there are Americans—lots of them—who are intimidated, who make bad choices or no choices, whose lives are a script written by others more powerful. In a society like ours that preaches transparency and what you see is what you get, we bury these conflicts and forces to enjoy the myths about ourselves. The dynamics of overt oppression are easier to grasp than the more sublimated pressures we now face. Coming to us from far away, they cross our mental borders as metaphors; they enter our minds to give shape to our vague feelings of nameless unhappiness, our luxurious ennui that may appear motiveless but isn't. But we can't rely only on egotistical appropriations of other lives, elsewhere. We, too, need to read American novels as if we were foreigners dreaming of America. Our attentiveness must get us past the veil of everyday signs, revealing the apparently smooth and satisfied surface image to be chipped and scored through by comedies, tragedies, and histories. If we learn to read again, to read as if our lives were at stake, we'll have to thank the Iranians.+



Dissent

"an obscure journal"
—Alexander Cockburn

"The most useful political magazine in the United States today."
—Richard Rorty

DECIDE FOR YOURSELF.
Subscribe to Dissent

• •

☐ **Yes, I'd like a subscription to *Dissent*.**
☐ $24/year ☐ $17/student ☐ $40/2 years
☐ Check enclosed ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Card No. ____________________

Signature ____________________ Exp. __________

Name ____________________

Address ____________________

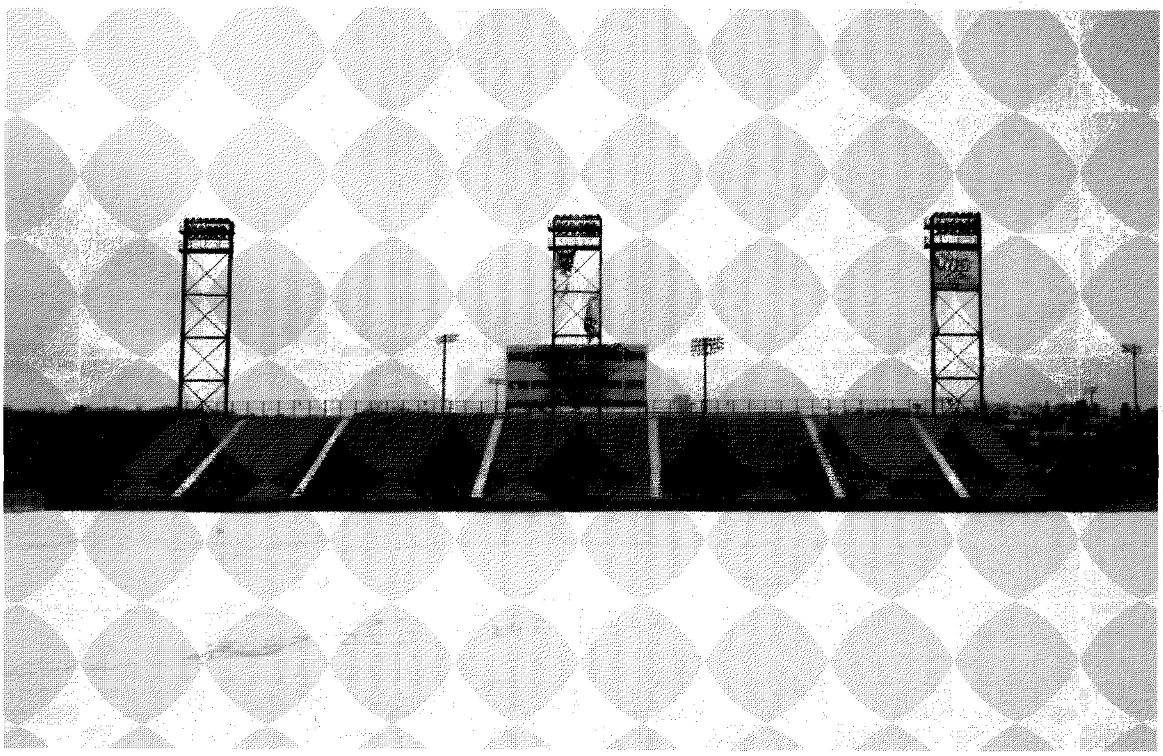
City/State/Zip ____________________

www.dissentmagazine.org
310 Riverside Drive, #1201, NY, NY 10025

4N+15E

lucien

Restaurant/Bar 14 First Avenue, New York, NY 10009



Stadium. Erin Kasimow, ©2003

FONTANA

Sam Lipsyte

SAM LIPSYTE'S SECOND *novel,* Home Land, *is the story of Lewis Miner, a failed aphorist and part-time soft-drink advertiser who has taken to writing lengthy updates to his high school alumni newsletter. "It's confession time, Catamounts," he begins. "It's time you knew the cold soft facts of me. Ever since Principal Fontana found me and commenced to bless my mail slot, monthly, with the Eastern Valley High School Alumni Newsletter, I've been meaning to write my update. Sad to say, vanity slowed my hand. Let a fever for the truth speed it now. Let me stand on the rooftop of my reckoning and shout naught but the indisputable: I did not pan out."*

Lewis's updates languish unpublished. Ex-Principal Fontana is to blame, no longer at the helm of Eastern Valley HS (mascot: the catamount) due to a teen escort scandal, now embroiled in a dangerous affair with Jazz Loretta, the most beautiful girl in Lewis's graduating class. Lewis's battle to wrench some recognition for himself and his friend Gary from Fontana and their former classmates comprises the book's narrative. In the course of this, Lewis—nicknamed "Teabag" after an incident from his sophomore year ("It hadn't bothered me much at the time. I'd been under the impression it was some kind of a hazing ritual. What hurt was afterwards, when I still didn't belong.")—emerges as a darker (and lonelier) version of manic Whitman, shouting the truth about the homeland into unwilling ears. He is jeered and threatened; former football captain Phil Douglas even tells him to stay out of the mall ("It was a silly thing for him to say, Valley Cats," Lewis comments. "No man can tell another man to stay out of the mall. That's not how America works. That's not what the framers intended"); but he carries on.

The excerpt below picks up at the end of Lewis's first update. The entirety of that update appeared in Fence, *v. 5, n. 2. After making the rounds of American publishers,* Home Land *appeared in England this past February. It will finally come out in the States as a Picador paperback original in January, 2005. That this quintessentially American novel, one of the funniest books in years, will have been available to British readers well before its appearance here, is not one of our publishing industry's prouder moments.*

LAST WEEK GARY and I decided to check out this new titty bar in town. It's a decent joint called Brenda Bruno's near the River Mall. The dancers are all educated so there's no exploitation and the DJ is a connoisseur of the moody tunes I favor in the company of nude women who despise me. There we were, Gary and I, having a grand old time sipping our greyhounds, when in walked Principal Fontana. He seemed to stagger a bit, which we took for too much whisky, par for the Fontana course, until we noticed an unbelievable amount of blood pouring off the poor guy's head. His shirt collar couldn't soak it up fast enough and it was hard to believe he was still on his feet. He walked around the bar like that for a while, looking for all the world like a butchered zombie, or a man born old, full-sized, womb slime still on him. Nobody moved to help him and I could see the barback going for the telephone. Gary and I, we made an executive decision to seize Fontana by the elbows, guide him out to the parking lot.

"Get your filthy hands off me!" said Fontana.

"Principal Fontana," I said. "It's us, it's us!"

"I don't know you fucks," he said. "Your faces. Where's Loretta?"

"Jazz Loretta?" I said.

"Let him go," said Gary.

Fontana loped across the parking lot and over the guardrails of Route Nine. We watched him weave off into darkness towards the boat basin. We stood and watched the darkness where he'd been.

"You should write this up for that newsletter," said Gary.

"Are you nuts? Fontana's the editor. He'll never print it."

"He has to print it. It happened."

"So it's an update?"

"Damn right it's an update. An update is an update. The things that happen are the things that happen."

Forgive me, Principal Fontana, but Gary has a point. Updates are updates, and it is in this spirit, assuming you survived your evening of massive blood loss on the trash slopes of the boat basin, that I know you'll publish mine.

NOT YET, APPARENTLY. Today, this came in the mail.

> *Hey, Miner:*
>
> *Cut the crap. Whatever you think you saw you didn't see. Nobody wants to read your babble, anyway. Catamount Notes is a forum for decent people to celebrate the ongoing celebration of their lives. Hence my decision to omit*

your update. Save it for the Teabag Review, okay? Or maybe the Scumbag Review would be better.

All Best,
Fontana

PS Who the hell is Jazz Loretta? What in Jesus Christ are you talking about?

I pored over the postcard, hoped to precisely ascertain its tone, deconstruct its guiding logic, tease out its myriad tropes, but I lacked the proper training. Hate to say it, Catamounts, but we didn't have tropes at Eastern Valley.

I called Gary, read him Fontana's card.

"You've got him on the run," said Gary. "Now's the time to go in for the kill."

"What are you talking about?"

"No matter what happens," said Gary, "you must not be silenced. It's like those poets they put in prison. They're heroes. Be a fucking hero."

"Fine," I said. "I'll be a hero. It's not like they can put me in jail for writing updates."

"You should read the paper, if that's what you think."

"I do read the paper."

"You read that fascist one."

"It's funny."

"Laugh for me when they put you up against the wall."

GOOD PEOPLE, AS I peruse this latest update, composed, as you can see, in the face of severe Fontanian repression, it occurs to me that I've taken the wrong tack. My aim continues to be an essay into the truth of my condition, and thus, the Catamount condition, but under the current *Notes* regime, which seems willing to support only the most craven declarations from the Eastern Valley community, it appears I've failed to heed an important lesson. The sole weapon against censorship is guile.

How shameful it's come to this, though. Fontana was not always so despotic. Some of him is made of charm. Even the charmless parts, I believe, were acquired in provinces of real human pain. I could tell you some stories, true Fontana Arcana, about his master's thesis on adolescence in postwar American literature, his brief national poker ranking, the handles of White Horse delivered weekly to his house by ex-Catamount Sousaphonist and Pittman Liquors scion Randy Pittman. I could delve into the man's divorce after the teen escort scandal. A lead is even developing on where he buys those hideous lime-green jeans he favors in the springtime.

Don't get me wrong. I've always had deep affection for Fontana. Back when he roamed the hallways of Eastern Valley there was a sort of compass-less majesty about the man you couldn't help but admire. He'd maybe lit out from one of his busted selves years before, wandered tundras of indecision, kept himself alive in bleak altitudes, battled the elements within and without, but never found that hidden pass to New Fontana.

I could tell you about the time he pulled me into his office for a private audience. It was late in my junior year. I'd been idling near the juice machine with Gary. Gary had a lot of theories in those days. He was a fan of ancient astronauts, especially their work in the entertainment industry. Today's lecture hinged on Thurman Munson, the great Yankee catcher of our youth. Munson had not plunged to his death piloting a twin engine airplane, but was living under an assumed identity, supervising a new secret baseball program in the Soviet Union.

"That's bullshit," I said. "I sold his widow a spaghetti spoon for our Weebalo fundraising drive six years ago."

"Which proves what?"

"She was a widow, man. Munson was dead."

"Or else he was in fucking Leningrad. Plus, there's no such thing as a spaghetti spoon. It's just the name they gave to some piece-of-junk ladle."

Now Fontana glided by, his usual afternoon rounds. The corridors had a cool empty beauty he must have savored. His polo shirt was nearly the teal of the walls. A pair of golf cleats, slung from his neck, swayed on their laces.

"Boys," he said.

"Sorry," said Gary. "We'll go to the library."

"No," said Fontana, "just listen to this."

He read from a paperback wedged in his hand:

"They said, 'You have a blue guitar
You do not play things as they are.'
The man replied, 'Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'"

Fontana snapped the book shut, stroked his cleats.

"Wallace Stevens. Not bad for an insurance executive."

"My cousin has a blue guitar," said Gary. "A Gibson Explorer."

"Are things changed upon it?" said Fontana.

"Yeah, when he plays it through a Marshall stack."

"Funny child," said Fontana, and spun himself, clumsily, upon the tiles. He always seemed his weakest forcing whimsy.

"Miner," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Fontana."

"Follow me."

Fontana had a Velcro dartboard in his office, a wire basket full of golf balls. A framed postcard painting of an old-time gunslinger hung on the wall behind his desk. Fontana caught me studying the man, the nickel-plated pistols shoved in gabardine pants, the mournful whiskers.

"That's Bat Masterson," he said. "Lawman, quick-draw artist, killer. He was also, in later years, an accomplished sports journalist. Died typing."

"Well-rounded," I said.

"Bet your ass," said Fontana. "Sorry. Language."

"I don't mind," I said. "You should hear my father."

"Take a load off."

Fontana slid down in his district Naugahyde. I took a swivel stool near the window. Chip Gallagher's father, Batch, mowed the ballfield, rode high on his machine, trailed oil smoke. His windbreaker snapped, fluttered, presumably in wind.

"Good old Batch," said Fontana. "Know what he's doing?"

"Mowing the ballfield?"

"He's making the smell of fresh-cut grass."

"Oh."

"We've never really conversed, have we?"

"You've told me to go back to class a few times."

"I don't remember."

"That's okay."

"I should remember. That's the thing. I want to be involved in your lives. Or I think I do. But then, really, when I look into my heart, I'd rather be on the driving range, or getting drunk, or my wick dipped. Is this shocking you?"

"Some nights," I said, "I picture myself naked, covered in napalm, running down the street. But then it's not napalm. It's apple butter. And it's not a street. It's my mother."

"Right," said Fontana. "I knew I could talk to you. I read your file. You're one of those not uncommon cases. You don't really fit into any category. You're pretty bright, but no student. You hate jocks but you do appreciate a good sporting event.

You deplore violence, except against the state. You're sort of bitter, but beyond the more stupid varieties of rage. You think of pussy all the time. Not just pussy. Breasts. Butts. Even the occasional schlong. It's all a flesh swarm in your mind. You think you'd like to be some kind of artist, but you have no idea what that means, and you're afraid you're too dumb, which could be true."

"That's in my file?"

"No, just scores and grades. Extracurriculars, tardies. The rest is extrapolation. Professional guesswork. How am I doing?"

"Perfect score. Were you like me in high school?"

"No, not at all. In fact, I think I'm more like you now."

"That's weird."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Our ages are not our ages, you know? Adolescence, post-adolescence, it's not just a matter of body hair. They're philosophical positions. I wrote a thesis about this once. Sort of. Didn't finish. Should have finished. Goddamnit, Miner, most of these kids at school here, I hate them. They're all phonies. I want to rebel against them. They don't understand me. How do I connect with them?"

"You can't."

"That's what I thought. There's no way, really. And really, it's not my fucking job. My job is to make sure you go to class. That you don't blow dope on school grounds. Speaking of which, I know about the maintenance shed. Stay the hell away from there."

"Copy that."

"What's with the jargon? The argot? Are you crestfallen you don't have a war? A police action? Something muddy and devastating? Some absurd carnage you can hang your disaffection on?"

"Affirmative."

"Do you know how idiotic that is? How horrible napalm is? Or was? Or is?"

"Sir, I do, sir."

"Well, then, that's good. You can go on back to class."

"I have a free."

"I took you from your free? I'm sorry for that."

"It's okay."

"You can tell people what we talked about. I don't give a damn. I'd rather you didn't, but it's your call."

"I think I'll leave it here."

"A wise and generous decision."

Gary was still waiting by the juice machine.

"What happened?" he said.
"The maintenance shed is a no go."
"Shit," said Gary.

POINT BEING, CATAMOUNTS, I could write reams on my former confidant Fontana. But he's a different man now. He's not that tender teen trapped in a slack duffer's body whose misery spoke to us so. His stewardship of the *Notes* has warped him somehow. How else to explain the latest outrage? Perhaps you saw it in your mails, Catamounts, in the latest *Notes*, as you nooked up on the sofa for a visit with your cougar kin. Some alums had acquired new coordinates of toil on the corporate slave grid. Others were celebrating the advent of poop-smeared approximations of themselves. Sure, I myself had nearly tossed the issue aside in favor of a longish essay on the return of moral elegance I'd clipped from *MindStyle*, one of my not-so-free free magazines, when I saw it, that lone boxed item beside the ad for Pittman's Liquors ("Don't even try to get up — We deliver!"). The headline read: TEABAG SPEAKS.

That bastard. This was worse than the blackball. He'd fiddled with my prose. Here, in its entirety, for those who missed it, is what some ghoulish version of me, concocted in the recesses of Fontana's obscenity of a mind, supposedly wrote:

> *Hi, everybody! It's Lewis Miner, class of '89, and I'd just like to send a shout out to all you Catamounts and let you in on what's been happening to the old Teabag. I'm doing real well working for a big soft drink company (free sodas on me, friends!) and I've got a nice spread out here in Eastern Valley. I still see some of you Catamounts around town, which is always a pleasure. Mostly I just want to say whassup to Principal Fontana, who got me through some rough spots back in the crazy old days. I'll never forget you, Dr. F! Peace out, Teabag.*

The "peace out" was an especially nice touch on the part of "Dr. F." (How's that dissertation coming, dickfart?) Damn near diabolical. He might have destroyed me in so many ways but he opted for the foolproof: wholesale update rape. Nice try, Fontana, you would-be plow mule, but I will not be broken. One cannot violate verity without consequence, pal.

PLOW-MULE? YES, Catamounts. The other day Gary picked me up in the Retractor Mobile.

"I've got a gift for you," he said.

We drove down Hoyt, turned off Mavis near the county line, parked near a house on a cul de sac called Drury Court. The place sat back behind some birch trees, a modified ranch. We sneaked up to a shrub-mobbed window. "Consider this woe compensation," said Gary.

"I'm not woeful."

"Just fucking look."

It was a big room with a shag carpet, antique lamps, a cabinet TV from days when entertainment lurked in the guise of furniture. Fontana was on his hands and knees, yoked to a vacuum cleaner, naked beneath his harness. We could hear the suck and whine of the machine. A whip tip of knotted rawhide kissed his strap-reddened back. Fontana plowed out of view and now came the bare lovely legs of the living room tiller. I jutted my head past the hedges for a better look.

Jazz Loretta!

The years had been kind to her. Slavish, even. Black eyes still beamy. Her body a pale and beautiful root.

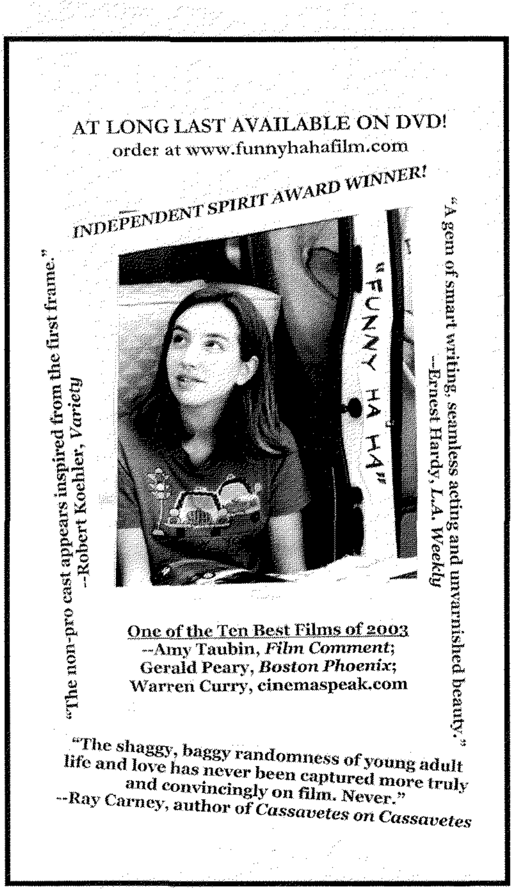
Her sorry domination of the educator Fontana, her slack way with the bull-whip, the giddy-ups, it was not good theater. Probably this pair would have been laughed out of any decent dungeon in the Northeast. But their joy looked true. Truer than mine, the peeper's. I pulled back from the window. The Hoover howled, revved. +

SOUTHFIRST GALLERY

www.southfirst.org

HOURS: FRIDAY - SUNDAY, 1 PM - 6 PM

60 North 6th Street Brooklyn, NY 11211
phone/fax: **718 599 4884**



AT LONG LAST AVAILABLE ON DVD!
order at www.funnyhahafilm.com

INDEPENDENT SPIRIT AWARD WINNER!

"FUNNY HA HA"

"The non-pro cast appears inspired from the first frame."
--Robert Koehler, *Variety*

"A gem of smart writing, seamless acting and unvarnished beauty."
--Ernest Hardy, *L.A. Weekly*

One of the Ten Best Films of 2003
--Amy Taubin, *Film Comment*;
Gerald Peary, *Boston Phoenix*;
Warren Curry, cinemaspeak.com

"The shaggy, baggy randomness of young adult life and love has never been captured more truly and convincingly on film. Never."
--Ray Carney, author of *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*

CUE
ART FOUNDATION

Fall Schedule 2004

September 9 - October 16
Jerry Moriarty
Curated by Art Spiegelman
Stephen Andrews
Curated by Atom Egoyan

Tuesday, October 12
Reading by Russell Banks

October 21 - November 27
Brian Moss
Curated by Lisa Yuskavage
Josh Dorman
Curated by Paul Auster

Friday, October 22
Reading by Paul Auster

December 9 - January 29, 2005
Thomas Ashcraft
Curated by Bruce Nauman
Tina Girouard
Curated by Susan Rothenberg

511 W. 25th St., NY, NY 10001

t. 212-206-3583 f. 212-206-0321

info@cueartfoundation.org

www.cueartfoundation.org

Smile. Ellie Ga, ©2004

ART CHRONICLE; or, The Icon Emigrating

Dushko Petrovich

El Greco and Philip Guston at the Met

El Greco is like waking up in the middle of the night and seeing triangles. Guston is staying up and seeing french fries. It was a punchy gray dream to see them together.

Without El Greco, it would have been impossible to imagine, and useless to be shown, what the iconic color and space of the East would do when hit with the overwhelming technologies of Venetian oil paint and perspective. Impossible to imagine because only he could take a Byzantine head and pin it to the rich technique learned from Titian.

Useless to be shown, because European art galloped along just fine from the 16th century to the 20th, ignoring his discoveries. The abused perspective, the colors in flat, acidic tangles, were ugly and strange to centuries of pale European eyes. But El Greco, with his shards of space and torn belief, came alive as we approached the awfullest century, when history broke open—when the smooth spaces and easy stories became history painting—when classical stillness collapsed. Our new-old masters, Cézanne, Picasso, could see him. He took Cézanne through still lifes and landscapes. El Greco never really left Picasso's side, leading him from thin blueness into cubism, out into the horror of Guernica and on to the last years of blue-gray diaries. After the long 20th century, we know how to see his inscrutable inherited beliefs dancing in unresolvable spaces, we remember bodies stretched excruciatingly to heaven, we feel the icon emigrating.

Without Guston, what? Can we see *him* yet? We swim in a generation of painters who only saw his cartoonishness and took up his concern for crapola. Guston was run out of art town for crudely painting figures, an apostate from Abstract Expressionism—then posthumously invited back, so he could be even more crudely simplified. Like El Greco, he left false piety for strange devotion. And he's been rewarded with the kind of imitation that mostly demonstrates a continuing blindness.

In 1968, the Democratic Convention broke heads, so Guston broke out. Nixon swelled with lying, Guston drew him that way. Guston said he didn't just want his paintings to sit on the wall. The world was horrible, and the art world was being polite. So Guston invited hairy limbs to the party. What are those limbs doing? Can anyone explain their behavior? When he had the first show of late work at Marlborough Gallery, everybody said, "Yuck, cartoonish cigarettes." Now it's "Yay! Cartoonish cigarettes!" Has anybody really looked at those things?

A painter's painter, he was intruded upon by meaty phantoms from Odessa pogroms, his father's junkyard, a frontier Los Angeles of 1919. The clumsy hoods and piles of cigarettes were a serious confession. He was a great painter who had finished with his era's overabundant and fail-proof flat paintings of stripes. And what came out? Inscrutable icons emerged, inviting us to look at the century again. This is precisely why it is such a crime to pretend the klansmen and chubby junk piles are a pose or a style. Hilton Kramer tried that argument out by famously saying Guston was a mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum. Nowadays, we have theories piled up to bolster a creeping technical incompetence. On the supposedly avant-garde side of this important misunderstanding, you see an art world full of stumblebums as mandarins.

JOHN CURRIN AT THE WHITNEY

John Currin, on the other hand, "knows how to paint." Everybody's been wondering just how he painted his baby's balls to look so big in that *New Yorker* photo. I don't have any answers.

After I saw the show he curated at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, I looked through a book of his paintings and thought, why apply the most mediocre tropes of Northern European painting to big breasts, turtlenecks, and bad skin? I decided he had a magazine-size imagination. But when I walked out into the world, all the women looked as if he had painted them. I prepared my retraction. Then I remembered it was wintertime in Boston.

The Whitney retrospective provoked a season of self-congratulation. A mid-career retrospective for a teenage middle-aged man turns out to be just the thing for everyone to agree on. The new work featured "Thanksgiving," an Italian mannerist trio of Thomas Hart Benton-curving ladies and an impressive plucked turkey. But you've seen mannerism, you've seen Benton, and you've eaten turkey. You're full. Some people think it's de facto interesting to think about what the art world thinks is interesting. This deserves a Currin image: a circle-jerk of castrati. They sing so sweetly!

In back were much better pictures, the humiliated attractive women who made his reputation: the busty bobby-soxers, the estrogenless socialites. Ten years ago Currin had promise. Now he's enthroned.

Like safely risqué cartoons, his pictures are skillful and sometimes funny. Punny titles, impolite jokes, deft references. He built a style in the 1990s "Age of Irony," and this kind of thrift-store satire was native to a painter on his way up. What is boringly sad is when he is talked about as if he were not just a painter, but *the* painter, and it is said that a few of his skillful images could again give painting its direction. That would be the last sincerely ironic joke, my friends. We are not so starved for tits.

A Yale art student told me Currin once made the following pronouncement: Americans are afraid to make great paintings.

Richard Serra's Figures in Landscapes

Serra at Gagosian: As it turns out, large-scale, macho minimalist sculpture inspires nothing so much as small-scale effeminate chatter.

Serra at the Guggenheim, Bilbao: As it turns out, there is no better way to fill a big, empty, big-name museum than with a big, empty, big-name sculpture.

Serra at Yale: Silent and gothic.

Serra commissions in public spaces: An interesting court case.

Chorus: Over the Years

Over the years, images replaced paintings, and objects replaced sculptures. But painting was quietly both an image and an object.

Over the years, systems and projects replaced style. You see a series of ecological niches. One bird will eat brown grubs in distinction to one who eats black. But a common ancestor ate something better than grubs. If everyone is trying to make something unassailable and market-precise, they'll end up crawling into some very small corners.

Some of this work has been fine and interesting. It expresses the artists themselves, if nothing better than themselves. But an art world thick with underdeveloped and overpraised visions gives the most power to curators and critics, since they're the only ones left to present a complete picture. Using magazines and group shows, they gather the various minor characters together and give them their roles. This assembly satisfies many with a very good picture of the art world, but it somehow fails to deliver the world.

Over the years, names came and went. An accepted term for our condition was post-minimalism. You were either post or neo. It's time for more capacious terms—post-neo! The new post.

Over the years, history has been preparing the ground for something new. After decades of debating whether painting was an illusionistic window or a formalist wall, we realized it was a door. Most walked out. But a few quietly slipped in.

Isn't painting finally an open question again?

ELIZABETH PEYTON AND DAVID HOCKNEY AT THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL

Painters can wind up looking like what they paint. It can be a sign of genius, or inflexibility. Like David Hockney in his striped ties and brightly mismatched hearing aids, Elizabeth Peyton, too, looks like her pictures. She paints the young, dreamy, and successful. In photos, she gives the camera that soft, almond-eyed, and loving look she so often paints onto her models.

Both painters are now famous painters, and they've been hung across from each other in the same room of the Whitney Biennial. Peyton is young and chose Hockney as her master. Hockney is old, and his greatness shows how little the disciple has learned. When you come to resemble what you paint, maybe it matters that Hockney paints swimming pools, interiors, streets, and gardens, so looking like them proves his negative capability. Peyton paints rock stars, celebrities, and her friends, who look like they wish they were rock stars and celebrities.

Peyton's best picture at the Whitney depicts an awkward human seated on a chair, wearing patterns, slightly lazy and good-looking. Beautiful, actually; a beautiful human. It seems appropriate to our time. It recalls good Hockney—astute, honest, and witty with the patterns. It lacks the astonishing talent, though, the indefinable addition. The beautiful young person is not the occasion for wonder that he is in Ingres, Parmigianino, or Matisse. We start to feel that it's unimportant to paint beautiful people, and that's an awful feeling.

The curator confirms this by wildly including a da Vinci copy Peyton made. It is a painting of a beautiful painting, and it shows you what you find in the pictures of the beautiful people: nothing. Nothing, that is, you didn't already know from seeing beautiful people in life, beautiful paintings in the museum.

David Hockney only has a few watercolors up on the opposite wall. Is he the most famous living artist after Thomas Kinkade and before Damien Hirst? He has the most visual talent. Over forty years, he's applied it to painting's unfinished business—representation. He wondered about space via Picasso and decoration via Matisse. He wondered about photography all on his own, and he changed our art-historical understanding of the camera's place in the history of painting, both with his writing and his photo collages. In California, he invited Asia westward, made some of the best gay paintings ever, and perfectly captured, as a foreigner, the spirit of the place, even trying to paint the perhaps unpaintable Grand Canyon. He and his work are disarmingly frank and generous, and art people mostly hate him.

The star of his wall at the Whitney is a friendly and cool horizontal interior. There is a lamp flanked by two striped couches, all of it pale and sure. A fireplace, black marks, hangs back in the center of the painting. We hardly notice the work of it, the wit and sense is light, but we can return to it, we want to revisit that room.

Hockney has looked at a lot of Chinese paintings over the years, and this painting distills those lessons. The marks are concise, the scale is human and somewhat larger all at once, and the eye has true freedom as it wanders around. The myopic perspective of the West and the tightness of our realism are loosened. The Chinese say you can't paint nature, but you have to paint like nature. In a similar way, Hockney doesn't imitate Chinese painting, he just paints with its openness. Like da Vinci, he can draw water.

AMY SILLMAN AT THE BIENNIAL

Amy Sillman's quiet, medium-sized pictures may go unseen by many at the Biennial, but those who notice them slow down in their vicinity. Instead of soliciting attention, they reward it. They are a bright pause in the show, a bright hope.

Her pictures are like an amusement park in winter. Built and empty, oddly explosive and circumspect. Curtains reveal tangles of color, weird bouquets, and even funny little animals. It is hard to say what they mean, except: not what you think they mean. In a Biennial experience otherwise a lot like a circus, these pictures play a strange role, being a quietly deeper show. They are an empty cage at the back of the tent, and when you look inside, you see the rare tiger too precious, or too dangerous, to be taken out.

One big oil rides three crude cartoons of sleeping human figures, making horizons on the canvas for something planetary. The fundament, down below, is a stretched sleeper whose feet turn downwards; his head is a pink fleshy circle marked by its radius. The middle ground is a living being mazed with colored triangles like a pipe-cleaner mosaic. A sea and mountain landscape rides the topmost dreamer, as a jack-in-the-box zooms out of a cock-mountain to say: "Hello!" The face in the top left corner emanates a line of yellow commas like zzzs. The whole thing is called "Hamlet."

Another of the achievements in these paintings is the palette. In this carnival the weather turns wet. There are strange flurries of warm and meteorological marks. The palette seems to be in flux—gray blushed purple, a red losing its brightness to white, orange and green imitating and confronting one another. They move in strange ways: they are divided vertically, in panels where one or another language of representation will giddily take over, and passages that she fought for and ones she thinly charmed. The pictures change with distance and over time, and they surprise on every level.

One is reminded: painting is an open question. Guston makes a grand return in Sillman. He is in the structure and the mood. The piles of tubes, plumbing, and junk somehow are turned into these gorgeous multicolored mazes. Her mysterious gestured-at figures might be smoking pipes in the Guston manner—or is that the thing's *lip*? You could never have guessed he could return this way. Even the palette seizes it—at once auroral and cruddy, her colors make a sympathetic translation of his late sensibility. It is all the more amazing for the colorlessness of Guston's late work, which renounced the fineness of color, though color had made his name in the period of abstraction.

If one were to conclude anything about Amy Sillman, it would be how grateful we are not to have to conclude. The paintings have the confidence to suggest, but not impose, a future line. Her career seems likely to stay open and curious, giving viewers the same expectant feeling with which Sillman seems to paint. One can only look forward to more of her multiple horizons.

Coda

In an image-drowned world, where a digital picture is as easy to make as a phone call, painting has a responsibility to be the visceral exploration of the visual. It has the opportunity to enjoy its slow strength—and its double palpability, as space and substance.

In an art world awash in ideas, painting has the job of embodying ideas in an ancient medium. For a time, this history was seen as a narrowing corridor, which at any step might conclude. Now we notice the collections of doors in that hallway, opening on multiple futures and on the scenes of astonishing depth and variety of the past, the painted caves, palaces, churches, and galleries that came before us, and sustain us.

Representation had looked like a burden for painting. It was an act of violence, imposing its frame on the world. We now see that it can also be a glimpse of the perpetrator at the crime scene, a tantalizing flirtation, a funhouse mirror, a raw dream, or a visual eulogy to the constantly disappearing world. Where *could* its limits be? +

From the series *Russian Homes.* Michael Alexander, ©2004

PARANOIASTAN

Masha Gessen

When the country's richest man goes to jail, that must mean something. Back in November, when Russian oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested and then arraigned on seven different charges ranging from tax evasion to fraud, I spoke at two different roundtables devoted to the question of why he was arrested. (Not, obviously, because he was guilty.) At the same time a friend of mine, a journalist in Moscow, compiled a list of seventeen different theories. The reasons for Khodorkovsky's arrest proposed by these theories included: his political views (liberal), his wealth (excessive), his provenance (Jewish), his business stance (aggressive), his plans for his oil company (international), his willingness to share the wealth with the country's rulers (insufficient), his enemies (jealous), his friends (disloyal), his political contributions (unsanctioned), and several other, related factors. The list also included the possibility that Khodorkovsky was guilty as charged and the prosecutors could actually prove it as well as connect him to two murders, as they also promised to do—but this possibility was Number 17, a humorous afterthought. It was also the only option that raised more questions than it answered.

If Khodorkovsky is guilty, he has committed crimes that characterize his generation of Russian businessmen: they all cheated on their taxes; they all navigated the maze of Russian and Soviet laws by obeying some and violating others; they all engaged in a variety of practices that were questionably legal, indisputably unethical, and obviously common practice. So why was he the only one arrested? Could it be that the prosecutors had collected evidence on him but not on the others? Then why? Could it be that he was guiltier than the others? Then how (it certainly wasn't evident from the charges)? And since the charges date back many years, did something happen to trigger the arrest? Or did the information on a variety of misdeeds suddenly land in the prosecutors' laps at this particular moment—why? Or could it be that he was singled out for some reason that had little or nothing to do with his alleged crimes? Go back to Versions 1 through 16: any—or, in fact, all—of them could be true, and, if true, would raise no further questions.

When you live, as I do, in a country where things just seem to happen because they do, with no apparent plan or reason, you can do one of two things. You can accept that bad things happen to good people, bad people, and in-between people at random. This is difficult. Most of us don't like to live with the idea that we could get arrested or killed or kidnapped at any moment. So we make up explanations, not so much for why someone has been nabbed, as for why *we* haven't: because we are not as inconsiderately rich, as politically opinionated, or as conspicuously Jewish. You might object that any country, even one as big as Russia, is bound to run out of the filthy rich and the screamingly Jewish sooner or later, rendering our defenses obsolete, but if you said this, you'd be missing the point. The point is to convince yourself that you are safe.

So, welcome to the world of the truly paranoid. Paranoia, according to Freud, is a hyperrational system within a given framework. The system makes sense; it's the framework that's crazy. That's how it worked in his world. In our world, too, the framework is crazy—so the system had better make sense.

Here is how it works. One night an apartment building on the outskirts of Moscow blows up—rather, several bags of explosives in the basement blow up, and the building crumples in, burying over one hundred residents under a pile of broken concrete. A week later, another building goes down, in a different Moscow suburb. In between, there is an explosion that brings down a building in a small southern city. There are 316 dead. The government quickly identifies the culprits as Chechen terrorists, and a new war in Chechnya is unleashed.

This happened almost five years ago, in August and September of 1999. At first, most Russians seemed to believe that the Chechens did do it. Muscovites spent a few weeks patrolling the streets of their city at night, on the lookout for suspicious people and pets (there was a rumor that some dogs had been found carrying explosives). Then they went home and felt helpless. Because you can't spend every night outside looking for terrorists. And even if you do, you might not catch all the terrorists. Or the terrorists might come during the day, when you are asleep after catching them all night. And then they might pick your building and blow it up, because they would have no less reason to blow up your building than to blow up the original three buildings (note that these were not the Twin Towers; they were not even distinguishable from any of the thousands of identical buildings that make up the suburbs of every post-Soviet city). Nor would the Chechens have any less reason to do it now, in 2004, when they are being massacred by Russian soldiers, than they did in 1999, when Chechnya was more or less left alone.

On the other hand, they may not have done it at all. The government still hasn't produced a shred of evidence linking Chechen terrorists to the apartment-building explosions. Maverick investigators, on the other hand, have uncovered some evidence linking the FSB, the secret police, to the bombings, or at least one foiled bombing of an apartment building in the provincial city of Ryazan. This is an altogether more comfortable and sensible theory. There is motive: the government wanted a new war in Chechnya, and the explosions created instant public support for it. There is opportunity: the buildings were all located in cities easily accessible to any FSB agent. There is the fact that people who wonder what happened have a way of getting into trouble: two deputies from the Duma committee investigating the explosions have been killed in the last two years; a lawyer for the committee was arrested, then fled abroad. Most important, though, there is the promise that it won't happen again, since the mission of the original explosions was accomplished long ago. Such are the spoils of paranoia: if you believe that your own government's secret police killed 316 civilians by blowing up suburban apartment towers, you can feel safe as a civilian going to sleep in a suburban apartment tower.

Back to our shifting framework. If the FSB blew up the apartment buildings, is it to blame for all the other acts of purported Chechen terrorism? Thirty-five honest-to-goodness Chechens took more than 800 people hostage in a Moscow theater in October of 2002. One could say that these were desperate Chechen men and women who really wanted to show Muscovites what war was like so that they would pressure their government to end the war. But that would have a number of troublesome implications. It would mean that it is unsafe to go to the theater or, possibly, to any public place. It would also mean that the Chechen terrorists, if they actually thought they could succeed, are insane, and this would be troubling. Alternatively, we could suppose that it was the FSB that organized/trained/funded a group of ethnic Chechens to go stage a hostage-taking because support for the war was waning (it was) and the government wanted to boost it (it worked). This theory has the added benefit of explaining how several vans filled with armed people and explosives could travel unmolested all the way to Moscow. So if the FSB did it, you can feel safe going to the theater.

SOMETHING BLOWS UP in Russia before any election. There have been trains, subway cars, rock concerts, and just plain sidewalk bombings. Now it wouldn't make much sense for Chechens to stage these explosions, which could only lead to anti-Chechen protest voting, would it? But it would make a lot of sense for the FSB, which strives to support not only the government but the most nationalist elements within it. A bomb is a good way to ensure turnout. Sometimes, though, there are actual Chechens linked to the crimes. But there is always something wrong with that picture. For example, in June 2003, when a bomb went off just outside a major rock festival in Moscow, killing sixteen people, the name of the supposed suicide bomber, whose passport was ostensibly found on the scene, came over the newswires at the very same time as word of the explosion itself. Who could believe that? An intact passport at the epicenter of a deadly explosion? Obviously, the passport was in the hands of the FSB, while the person it represented may have been martyred by the secret police or may never have existed in the first place. Or consider the case of a woman who wandered around the center of Moscow for hours before being apprehended by the police. She claimed to be a Chechen terrorist carrying explosives and taking directions by cell phone from more-senior terrorists. She surrendered her bomb, which she claimed she was unable to disarm. A robot was also unable to disarm the thing, which was sitting for hours on the sidewalk of Moscow's main street. Then a human FSB demining specialist arrived and was blown to pieces with not one but two Russian State Television cameras rolling. After state television broadcast the footage of the 29-year-old officer being pulverized, it released a recently banked interview with the same officer, being all personable, handsome, and articulate. An accident? Hardly.

Speaking of accidents. They happen. The country is in shambles. In fact, the science of these things told us that it was supposed to fall apart completely last year, when all its buildings, pipes, and communications networks should have collapsed from lack of regular maintenance. It didn't happen, or at least it didn't happen to everything everywhere at the same time. But some buildings did collapse. Some blew up, apparently as a result of natural-gas leaks. It used to be this sort of thing was explained one of two ways. Either the building was poorly maintained and there were indeed leaks, or some of the occupants had had their gas cut off for nonpayment and resorted to illegally connecting to the mainline, causing a leak. Obviously, these are unsatisfactory explanations, suggesting this sort of thing could happen anywhere (it does). So recently we in Russia have chosen to assign blame for missing valves. The term *social terrorism* has been born. A social terrorist is a person who is maybe angry about something, like maybe having his rent raised by the state, so he blows up the whole damn building. Someone just like this was recently arrested for allegedly loosening the valves on the gas pipes of a building in the northern city of Arkhangelsk; the building promptly blew up. This seems like a more controllable phenomenon than poor maintenance, if only because the enemy can be personified, but it's still not localized enough. I personally think the *social terrorist* is a phantom created by the FSB to drum up support for housing reform, which results in higher rents and gas payments—and perhaps a few buildings have been sacrificed in the name of preventing rent riots.

Go ahead. Call me paranoid. I challenge you to explain why one of the candidates in the March presidential election, a faceless bureaucrat named Ivan Rybkin, suddenly disappeared in February, only to show up four days later, babbling incoherently about being drugged and dragged off to Kiev. There were those who thought he'd had too much to drink and taken a long weekend. But then why did he drop out of the race and move to London? I think he was kidnapped by the FSB, which wanted him quiet the night after a bomb went off in the subway, killing about 40 people. Rybkin is connected to the people who have worked to publicize the theory that the FSB blew up the apartment buildings in 1999. He may have said the same thing about the subway explosion, so he had to be discredited, which was why his disappearance and blathering re-appearance were staged.

Or consider the case of Khodorkovsky, the jailed tycoon, who recently published a very bizarre open letter in a Moscow business daily. The letter said liberalism in Russia had failed and this was the fault of the liberals and the oligarchs, Khodorkovsky included, and this meant liberals should now maybe support Putin. There were those who thought the letter was a blatant plea for clemency from the president. There were those who thought the letter reflected what was really going through Khodorkovsky's head after five months in solitary in Matrosskaya Tishina prison, which is probably enough time for someone to start thinking he did something wrong somewhere. But then there were those who were asking the really important questions. Who actually wrote the letter? Khodorkovsky first said he did, then said he didn't, and then again said he did. He didn't *write* all the physical words in the letter, he said (that's what writers were for), but he took responsibility for all the words, making him the author. But then a political spin master named Stanislav Belkovsky said he didn't write it either, which was indicative of something, since Belkovsky, unlike Khodorkovsky, hadn't been asked. And if it was Khodorkovsky, then why did the letter, or what was clearly an earlier draft of it, appear on a Russian website a full 11 days before it got to the paper—and why, on the website, was it signed with a clearly fictitious name? Had someone *intercepted* the letter and leaked it? Had someone been engaged by Khodorkovsky to *write* it and leaked it? Or—you guessed it!—was it the *FSB* writing a letter to be passed off as Khodorkovsky's letter of atonement and test-driving it first on a website? Well?

If you know the answer, read no further. I don't. I have, however, written stories discussing the possibility that the FSB blew up the apartment buildings, trained the Chechen hostage-takers, and probably even engineered the on-air destruction of a demining specialist. I've written them because I think they're true. Someone recently broke into my apartment in Moscow and took an old laptop, plus the hard drive from my computer. I'm pretty sure it wasn't the Chechens.

Becoming the sort of person who believes that the FSB is responsible for a number of things the FSB could not, in a decent state or decent universe, possibly be responsible for—changes you. Because your reading of events is based on a set of beliefs rather than on evidence—the belief that these people are capable of this—and because it seeks to create logical constructions to fit a shifting framework, it resembles a worldview. And once people know your worldview, they conclude that they know what you'll think of everything. But you just want to shake them. These aren't my *beliefs*, you want to say. This is just what *is*. And isn't that exactly how crazy people think? +

Alternative Energy for the Alternative Intelligentsia

SPG
SUSTAINABLE PROFITABILITY GROUP

325 West 38th Street, Suite 802, New York, NY 10018
Tel. 212-736-1961 Fax 212-736-1962
info@sustainableprofit.com

PRINCE CHARLES PERFORMING BALLET IN EGYPT?

Who? What? Where?
Who
What
Where

Who? What? Where? is the most hilarious drawing game you'll ever play. Just sketch the outrageous scenes - like Prince Charles Performing Ballet In Egypt - and thousands more. Other players try to guess what you've drawn. Player with the best guesses or drawings wins!

San Francisco Chronicle's Best New Game of 2003

visit www.pazow.com for more information PAZOW

STOP EATING THE NORM

Ruins. Shirley Wegner, ©2003

MOGADISHU, BAGHDAD, TROY; or, Heroes Without War

Mark Greif

On March 31, 2004, two SUVs carrying contractors for Blackwater Security Consulting drove into an ambush in Fallujah. Four Americans were shot dead. All were ex-military men, at least two from the US special forces. A local crowd mutilated the bodies. Cheering and chanting "Fallujah is the graveyard of Americans"—some holding up computer-printed signs that said the same thing—the locals did the opposite of burying them. They burnt the bodies with gasoline. They beat and tore them. One body was tied with a yellow rope and dragged behind a car down a main street. Another was hauled by the legs by a group of teenagers. Two bodies were tied and hung from a green iron bridge that spans the Euphrates River.

Deaths by ambush occur every day now in Iraq. The Saddam Hussein regime lost a three-week war to the overwhelming force of the United States, a war in which our military conquered a nation of twenty-four million people, slightly larger in landmass than California, and left behind a partly relieved, partly dismayed population, who have since given birth to a variety of resistance factions.

The mutilations were unusual, however. The violation of dead bodies is against Islamic law; the dead are to be buried as soon as possible. Other American dead whose bodies were lost during the war were buried by locals.

The incident led to a massive and bloody US Marine offensive in Fallujah in the month of April, which we tried to understand from what we could read in our newspapers and see in the fragmentary footage on the television. We were told that clerics had ruled that the mutilations were an offense against Islam, and yet a Marine officer reported that a videotape of the mutilations was still selling well in many Fallujah shops.

History works by analogies. Eleven years earlier, a similar set of mutilations occurred in Mogadishu, Somalia. After a firefight with Somali militias, the bodies of three US soldiers—again, from the special forces—were captured by a local crowd. These American corpses were tied by hands or feet. One was splayed over a wheelbarrow. They were mutilated by dragging, in the dusty city streets.

The Mogadishu populace, too, adhered to Islam, and the mutilations were not sanctioned by religion. Saudi Arabian troops, stationed in Mogadishu, witnessed what local crowds were doing to the captured American bodies, and were appalled. "If he is dead, why are you doing this?" they shouted.

A last analogy. Three millennia earlier, the origins of our Western way of war unfolded in the battles between Greek and Trojan warriors on the plains of Troy. Homer recorded and embellished the story in the *Iliad*. A feature of the Greek way of fighting was the mutilation of the bodies of heroes. Achilles defeated Hector, killing him. And we know, from Book 22, what he did next, defiling the body by dragging its head in the dust: "Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet,/ he knotted straps of rawhide through them both,/ lashed them to his chariot . . . And a thick cloud of dust rose up from the man [he] dragged."

Whenever one compares modern war to ancient war, there is the danger of arguing for a simple continuity between all forms of war across history. Warfare is *not* continuous, however; methods change. American commentators have already invoked the Mogadishu mutilations multiple times—in the days and months following the spectacle in Fallujah—and this analogy, in their hands, has been misleading. Their implication was that we were witnessing a continuity of savagery, rather than civilization; an effort to throw Americans off their mission in Iraq, rather than a reflection on the character of the American military mission itself; a manifestation of terror, irrationality, or "mob mentality," rather than the orderly policies of war, which would be available to reason.

The purpose of the comparison should have been to ask why the repetition occurred, why a scene of the mutilation of the most visible and valuable American fighters, these special forces and elite security contractors, should be restaged compulsively each time the US fights its contemporary ground wars. The answer resides in the logic of the fighting itself. What do we know of the meaning of past warfare in which such spectacles were paramount? I do not mean to excuse the mutilators, or say that they have become Homeric. It is American fighters who have become Homeric. A small set of our frontline fighters have attained a kind of value and visibility unlike that of any enemy these soldiers could possibly face, or anyone else in the recent history of modern war. Mutilation is an invisible population's response to such power—they make themselves visible the only way they know how, by entering the system of American bodies and American lives.

THEORIES OF POSTMODERN war, and recent military histories and popular battlefield narratives, make equal and opposite errors about the nature of contemporary US combat.

War theorists only care about the new. To them, everything we see is wholly unprecedented and revolutionary. Before September 11, 2001, and the three years of continuous war that have followed it, a decade or more of thought on postmodern war said we were coming into the presence of a new formation in the history of the world. The human body would disappear from the scene of war. War would become a kind of video game for those people who would do the new postmodern killing. Virilio predicted the disintegration of the personality of the warrior. Baudrillard spoke of wars that didn't take place. Ignatieff analyzed "virtual war." Luttwak argued for "post-heroic war." Even in the Pentagon—especially there—the generals dreamed of a revolution in military affairs, of network-centric warfare, information warfare, and the possibility of killing without risking US life, making the loop between sensing and killing an opponent increasingly automatic and autonomous. This has partly come true.

Popular military historians meanwhile promote the misconception that wars are all the same, in all times, and that contemporary US fighters, despite their technology, are actually continuous with ancient warriors. "As with Xenophon's hoplites, the engine driving the campaign was not mechanical. Instead, it was a spirit, an unbroken code—" and so on. These commentators remember the past, but they paper over the strangeness of today.

In the battles the United States has fought on the ground in the last decade, we've seen something different from what both the dissipation-theorists and the warrior-traditionalists describe. In Mogadishu, at Mazar-i-Sharif or Tora Bora, in Nasiriyah, Najaf, Baghdad, and now Fallujah, we've seen something hidden since Vietnam—the way the US military currently trains and arms its best soldiers to fight on the ground, especially in urban or unconventional surroundings. Human bodies still do the face-to-face work of killing for the United States—just as in so many spheres of the postindustrial economy, small populations are still needed to do the skilled or filthy work that machines cannot reach. The military has become unprecedentedly reliant on a small number of frontline fighters, heavily equipped with technology, who are rewarded with a special kind of status.

Unfamiliar trappings surround them. US soldiers wear body armor of great technical ingenuity, flexible, miraculous. They fight with powerful, almost preternatural weapons, in episodes of virtuosic slaughter, until they withdraw to safety. Eyes circle overhead to guide them, superiors to whom they can appeal in times of trouble. Medicine makes wounds insignificant, as long as they are not instantly fatal. And when a military action takes a wrong turn, jeopardizing overwhelming US supremacy, or when any soldier is killed, the fighters may pause or even stop the operation, as if the primary goal of warfare were to preserve US lives rather than to win at any cost.

The oddity of this mode of fighting isn't quite that it marks a new formation in the history of the world, or comes unknown to us. It's that we thought we would never see it again. We are witnessing a temporary reconvergence with an ancient bit of history, caused by technology and the superior value the United States can now afford to put on the lives of its citizens and soldiers. In contemporary US warfare, the hero returns, in the manner of the *Iliad*, and "hero" has here a purely technical definition. He is the lone fighter, who takes the stage amidst a sea of mere mortal beings—one of only a few heroes who are comparable in abilities and significance. The hero may kill or be killed but he is always absolutely visible and valuable; owner of a social status, among the princes, *aristoi*, and in the front lines, *promachoi*, he is one of the select warriors who are by their method of life *hērōes*.

If we can see the relation of today's fighter to his Homeric predecessor, it will give us a window onto what is so strange in contemporary US fighting. The new conditions will become obvious, which have made our situation so confusing in the "War on Terror," the war in Afghanistan, and the war and occupation in Iraq. Only once these terms are set is it possible to understand that if postmodern conditions recreate the hero, of a sort we haven't seen in several thousand years, the same features may prohibit what our civilization has sometimes understood as the condition of war.

The changes in the US military go back to the Vietnam War, but the place to start to understand today's warfare is Mogadishu. On October 3, 1993, US special forces troops entered the Black Sea neighborhood of the Somali capital. They engaged local belligerents in the longest sustained firefight since Vietnam. The operation had been intended to take an hour. A journalistic account—*Black Hawk Down*, by Mark Bowden—details step-by-step the fourteen hours of fighting by US Army Rangers and Delta Force commandos that followed.

The American humanitarian mission to Somalia was meant originally to safeguard food aid during a famine. It turned into a campaign against the Habr Gibr clan and its obstructionist leader, Mohammed Farrah Aidid. By autumn of 1993, US troops had become accustomed to speedy arrests (or kidnappings) of clan officials. On October 3, soldiers landed in helicopters and captured two of Aidid's lieutenants. After that capture, however, a set of unanticipated events extended the fighting. A soldier fell from a helicopter. A helicopter was shot down by Habr Gibr militia—a feat not thought possible by Pentagon planners. A rescue convoy got lost in the streets. A second helicopter fell to a rocket. Repeated rescue sorties went out, returned, or were pinned down. Eighteen Americans had been killed by sunrise and seventy-three injured. Americans killed five-hundred Somalis and injured another 1000.

To anyone acquainted with the *Iliad*, this description of the fight in Mogadishu may make a comparison to Troy seem arbitrary. I have not left anything out that is crucial to knowing the events of *Black Hawk Down*. All that I have failed to indicate, perhaps, is how strange the details of contemporary combat practices feel to anyone accustomed to modern war in its 20th-century guise—the soldiers continually in the field, under orders, anonymous, *en masse*, seizing territory while continually at risk. Mogadishu does not look like war. It is odd to find US soldiers inserted and extracted for the briefest acts of violence, whisked away at the first sign of injury. It is unsettling to see a military offensive of sorts turn into a continuous rescue mission. It alters our picture of war, as the contemporary surgeries in which the heart is deliberately stopped and restarted after the completion of the procedure alter our picture of life. But the thrust of the comparison depends less on the circumstances of the conflict, more on the status of the fighter.

What does a Homeric hero look like? He armors himself. Well-made greaves defend his legs, a breastplate burnishes his chest; a massive shield, slung on his arm, turns away spears with layers of leather and bronze. The modern soldier of the Argonne Forest or D-Day had been nowhere so well protected except for his metal helmet. But the technology of armoring has radically improved. US forces now suit up fully for the first time in centuries. Fighters don body armor, helmets, and goggles. They wear Kevlar vests, formed of layers of shielding to turn away bullets, and tough Kevlar helmets. They tuck bulletproof ceramic breastplates into their flak vests, cushion their legs with kneepads, fight with personal sniper rifles, rocket launchers, super-precise and powerful weapons.

And how does the Homeric hero fight? The Achaean or Trojan wades into the slaughter, sending the shadow of his spear hurtling over the ground, killing as many as he can before he himself is wounded or withdraws. The structure of the battle follows a steady pace of attack and withdrawal. With Diomedes' advance, or Agamemnon's, or Achilles', Greek warriors drive their foes far back across the plain towards the gates of Troy. One peculiarity of this ancient method was that each army retained a steady place of rest. As chariots whisked them forward and back, soldiers attacked when angry and withdrew when wounded.

And, today, the incredible speed of helicopters and land vehicles recovers the ancient method from centuries of disuse. US troops maintained a secure camp on the beach in Somalia, unmolested, three miles from the center of Mogadishu—a broken-down Troy, with its burning tires and dung, its maze of littered streets and untouched mosques. American fighters "rope" in, rappelling from helicopters hovering fifty or seventy feet above the fray. With weapons blazing, they kill anyone who crosses their path. The dead fall around them until the American soldiers themselves—by mischance or fate—are wounded. As injuries occur, US fighters are "extracted" by speedy vehicles on the ground, or by small, agile helicopters that can land in the narrow streets.

Nor does any injury, in the *Iliad* or today, ruin a hero but the one that kills. Men like the Homeric heroes are never half-men, never maimed or in-between. An arrow in the foot or shoulder is cause to go home temporarily in a chariot. The puncture is healed by a medic or, occasionally, the succor of a god. When a US soldier is shot, anyone can make a quick calculation to know the significance of the wound. In the face or beneath a joint of armor, it will be fatal. Any other injury will be reparable, practically, as long as the mechanisms of extraction work successfully to take a soldier off the field. Even a frightened soldier can work out his chances, as Ranger Sergeant Raleigh Cash did in Mogadishu: "He had thought it through methodically. He was wearing body armor, so if he got shot, it would probably be to the arms or legs and there were medics who would take care of him. It would hurt, but he had been hurt before. If he was shot in the head, then he would die. If he died then that was what was meant to happen." The invocation of fate by this soldier is tempered by the sense that fate has but a slim margin within which to do its grisly work.

And substitute gods watch over the troops in their desert camouflage and flak vests just as the Olympians watched the furious mortals in their sport, bronze helmets flashing, on the plains of Troy. OH-58 observation helicopters pass over Mogadishu with cameras; a high-flying P3 Orion spy plane regards the fighting from the clouds. Satellites watch from above earth's atmosphere. A command-and-control helicopter hovers within range of the active soldiers, poised to give battlefield directions. The cameras also stream images in color video, plus infrared and heat display, to senior officers in control rooms miles or continents away, who watch until—very rarely—they attempt to intervene.

But the importance of the eye above a contemporary soldier at all times—just as it was with the eye looking down on the ancient soldier—is not really the efficacy of these gods, in pulling out wounded fighters or sending in bursts of terrible fire. It is, rather, the knowledge that someone is always up there, a peculiar reliance by the soldier on the sense that he is always, in some way, beneath the hovering US helicopter, under the range of the satellite, under the eye. He matters as a subject for attention. Even his agony registers in a higher consciousness.

All these practical features confer superior value. This is the attribute that unites the Homeric to the American hero. Other words capture subsidiary senses of the quality that adheres to the armored, barely killable, murderous, God-monitored fighter: singularity, irreplaceability, distinctness, visibility. The real uniqueness of the US fighter is located in his being seen and counted, monitored and protected, simply *worth* more than any enemy he could face. The maintenance of his life seems more important than any goal he could achieve.

AND SO ONE is struck by the two deep differences between Homeric and contemporary war. The first is that US postmodern fighters, unlike Greeks and Trojans, do not expect to die. The second is that US postmodern battle is one-sided—a fight against no other commensurable force.

Contemporary US fighters, regardless of their military goals, will go to great lengths to avoid the deaths of any of their own personnel. In Mogadishu, they nearly released the two men they had arrested when it looked as if these captives might slow down the soldiers' own rescue. Rescue becomes the ruling angel of warfare.

And the US begins to fight on a strategy of survival. The Mogadishu firefight as it is recounted in *Black Hawk Down* includes scattered killings of civilian noncombatants, glimpsed just out of the corner of the eye. If you keep a list, you can gradually develop a picture of what such fighting must mean to anyone not a US soldier, reporter, or citizen. As the assault begins, US fighters kill a few Somalis by accident. They shoot an innocent woman. They shoot a few boys. Their "rules of engagement" dictate they "shoot only at someone who pointed a weapon at them." But as risk accelerates, US soldiers and attack helicopters stop shooting civilians by mistake, and start shooting them deliberately. They shoot anyone advancing on the troops, then anyone suspicious in the vicinity, then any groups in the city moving in the direction of the pinned-down troops, then anyone at all. They gun down crowds on purpose.

Somali fighters, of course, are killed with just the same lack of registration as the crowds. Visible—they must be spotted, to be shot—but invisible. As the heroes occupy their peculiar haloes of bodily safety, a strategy of survival makes it harder to gaze out through this glare to identify anyone who might inhabit a different, more traditional order of life, such as these low-tech Somali fighters—a grim, unromanticizable bunch—who nevertheless cannot be extracted by helicopters, who cannot be remade by medicine, who fight as modern war taught them to, aiming at goals, expecting to die, and wiped out by American fighters in extraordinary numbers.

The Somalis become a natural or biological menace, a menace made of men. And this licenses any degree of killing of combatants or noncombatants. Again, that death toll: in fourteen hours, Somalis had 1500 casualties, a third of whom were killed. Fewer than one hundred American casualties occurred; of these, only eighteen were killed. We can remind ourselves that Americans' abstract moral beliefs are second to none. Whenever things go right, our military's adherence to certain conventions of war, at the level of planning and training especially, is admirable. But whenever things go wrong, a different order prevails. The strategy of survival bleeds into a reality of extermination, and a form of warfare in which, for Americans, there may be an enemy group, but there is no other side.

THE ANALOGY TO the *Iliad* is an aid to thought. Homer's poem is an example of warfare everyone knows. It is so different from what our warfare is supposed to be like now that it jogs the mind.

The long-term trend of recent US military planning is to expand and accelerate the features of ground combat that were most startling in Mogadishu. This has gone along with a particular line of military thought, now dominant in the Bush administration, which seeks to remodel all of the US military on the example of special operations forces. The Army's "I am an army of one" advertising campaign, before September 11, already recruited on the basis of the new conception, picturing individual soldiers, alone, wearing futuristic armor, almost unrecognizable as human beings, or else accomplishing extraordinary feats by themselves. As Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld has sold his idea of "transformation" of the armed forces—originally a matter of corporate-style "downsized" military organization, budgeting and goals—by concrete examples from the special forces, and by their conspicuous recent successes.

The conventional wisdom on the 2001-2 war in Afghanistan was that it was won almost entirely by a tiny number of special operations soldiers who called in massive air power. US heroes mobilized the "proxy fighters" of the Northern Alliance, target-spotted for precision bombing, and overthrew the government of a vast country—leaving a large ground force to be called in only later, when there was little left for it to do.

Pentagon planners love this model because it is quick, delivers more funding to technology and less to manpower, and is freer from public scrutiny and public opinion than the use of the regular military. Journalists have fallen in with it, too. The hagiographic literature of special operations forces in Afghanistan is both unilluminating and extensive. Many of the Afghan engagements are classified, but the few that are not resemble storybook tales. Heroes come roaring out of a curtain of precision explosions—as at Mazar-i-Sharif—on horseback, surrounded by faithful Northern Alliance fighters, to overwhelm a Taliban stronghold. Or heroes radio home the GPS coordinates for targets, or paint them with lasers, and moments later the enemy vehicles, or houses, or men, are vaporized by munitions dropped from Stealth bombers; the heroes melt back into the landscape, blending in with the natives. Rumsfeld himself, in a policy article in *Foreign Affairs*, likened the new forces of transformation to an opportunity to take an M-16 back to the Middle Ages. You wouldn't joust with the knights you met—you'd machine-gun them. Such was the curious charm of the special forces in Afghanistan.

The far more important development, however, may be that the armor and tracking devices which only belonged to the highest-value fighters in 1993 have been made increasingly available to a wider, though still relatively small, cadre of frontline fighters in the regular infantry and Marines. A Marine rifleman now wears a ceramic plate in his sapi vest, like a Delta operator ten years ago; an Army infantryman can be watched by drone planes, and his vehicle followed on the Blue Force tracker at headquarters. This is what we saw in Iraq, during our brief war.

Iraq: we now are coming to understand it better and better, as commentators relive our twenty-one days' war, then ask what went wrong. Iraq is the real test for the new conditions of combat.

New accounts of the war are arriving at a steady pace. We have David Zucchino's *Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad*, Rick Atkinson's *In the Company of Soldiers: A Chronicle of Combat*, Bing West and Major General Ray L. Smith's *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division*, Williamson Murray and Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr.'s *The Iraq War: A Military History*, and John Keegan's *The Iraq War*, among others. Each of the accounts by "embedded" journalists adds something new. The military histories mostly confirm the larger picture that the journalists sometimes can, sometimes cannot, see.

In Iraq, the trends toward the making of "heroes" continued. The heroic aspects of monitoring, armor and medicine appear in these books in familiar form. During the war, the death of any US soldier from hostile fire is rare and shocking. Operations pause to evacuate wounded soldiers by armored vehicle or helicopter. Medics see the benefits of the new personal armor—in one firefight, twenty men are wounded but "there were no head wounds, no sucking chest wounds, no wounds to vital organs."

And the United States fought another low-casualty war, with few personnel killed during the actual campaign, and remarkable numbers of Iraqi deaths whenever US forces encountered resistance. Murray and Scales cite one engagement west of the Baghdad International Airport on April 3, 2003. It began in late afternoon: "By early morning the bodies of nearly 500 fedayeen littered the ground in front of American positions." West and Smith recount an engagement at Diwaniyah: "In six hours, the battalion estimated two hundred Iraqi soldiers and fedayeen had died, not an unusual number, for the length of the battle and the panoply of weapons applied."

Zucchino gives figures for some of the dead in the fighting around Baghdad—where the massed corpses can be counted in one-mile stretches of highway, and intersection by intersection. In a morning-long engagement on April 5, "[t]he Desert Rogues [tank] battalion had just killed between eight hundred and a thousand enemy soldiers. . . . It had cost them one dead." On April 7, at one intersection, US forces may have "killed as many as two hundred and had destroyed at least forty-five vehicles. The company had not lost a man." At another: "Hubbard figured his men had killed up to four hundred enemy fighters and had destroyed eighty vehicles. A single American soldier had been injured—a minor shrapnel wound."

The strategy of the US ground campaign in Iraq was simple. The US had two large forces, both of which left Kuwait at the same time, pursuing roughly parallel paths north to Baghdad. The main force was the Army V Corps. It included the Third Infantry (Mechanized)—a powerful force of tanks and fighting vehicles—the paratroopers of the 101st and 82nd Airborne, and the commandos of the Special Operations Command. The I Marine Expeditionary Force had a comparable mix of tanks, helicopters, fixed-wing air support, artillery, and infantry. The Army struck along a Western route, on highways and briefly through the desert on the far side of the Euphrates. The Marines fought their way north on an Eastern route, between the Euphrates and the Tigris. The two forces converged on Baghdad.

At the battle for Baghdad, they reached what could have been the most elaborate and dangerous ground engagement the US had fought in decades. The original US strategy was to conquer Baghdad by making raids from stable bases outside the city, using the relatively small forces of the 101st and 82nd Airborne and the special forces, backed with every kind of firepower and support imaginable. This would have been like Mogadishu. Perhaps as late as April, official war plans called for these troops, who are transported in Black Hawks and closely supported by

Apache attack helicopters, to strike into Iraq's capital city and fight in the neighborhoods day by day, in raids of attack and withdrawal.

The US forces made a discovery during the earlier campaign, however, which changed all this. In the unique Iraqi environment, tanks could perform urban warfare as well as fight traditional open-field engagements in the desert. Because Iraq had maintained a full highway system—with road signs in Arabic and English—tanks could move swiftly wherever they liked. Because the monumental architecture of Saddam's Baghdad, not unlike the Mall in Washington, D.C., gave tanks room to maneuver at the heart of the capital, they could drive to the center of Baghdad and collapse the city's defenses from within. Because the Baath defenses included fixed roadside bunkers, light gun-mounted pickup trucks, and suicide cars—all easy targets for tank guns—the tanks were lethal and unstoppable. The armed hero found a new way to "walk" into a hostile city, in other words, with an even lower risk of injury—clad in even more invincible armor and with more unimaginable firepower, looking at the enemy streets over the sill of a turret, wearing the skin of a tank.

On April 5 and then April 7 and 8, 2003, Third Infantry tanks led so-called "thunder runs" into the city of Baghdad, killing all the fighters they encountered along the way. Nothing went wrong this time. The US forces killed, and killed, and killed. The main worry for the Americans, in the hottest engagements, was only that they would run out of ammunition.

And one sees the same ethos, the same super-power and super-value, among the frontline fighters, as in Mogadishu. The one-sidedness of this mode of battle is, again, dramatic. The tankers use thermal sights to find enemy targets by their body heat and vehicles by their engines and exhaust. The regular optical day-sights are also good enough to hit standing Iraqis who, relying on the naked eye, may not even know there's a tank in view: "Some of the dismounts would stand up right in the open. Gibbons would cut them in half with the coax and he and Booker would shake their heads and mutter, 'What the hell are these guys thinking?'"

The US heroes are consistently mystified by what the Iraqis are thinking, when they stick up their heads and have them blown off. Don't they know we have thermal sights? The Iraqis aim wildly, but the US machine guns, used properly, can't miss: "their computers corrected for range, lead, temperature, wind, munitions temperature, and barometric pressure. The tanks knocked down the fedayeen one or two at a time as they ran across open spots." The Iraqis continue to fight in the only way they know how—on their feet, with small arms, breathing and therefore generating heat. They die as they are glimpsed. "They were not giving up. It seemed suicidal—men with nothing more than AK-47s or wildly inaccurate RPGs were charging tanks and Bradleys. It was like they wanted to die, or worse, they didn't care," the tankers think. This is the logic of a higher form of life, regarding a lower.

A large part of the apparatus of the US military is of course still oriented to preventing US deaths. Colonel David Perkins, the commander of the 2nd Brigade tank force that made the final "thunder run," had to instruct his officers specifically against this ethos: "[H]e told his commanders that the mission's main goal was *not* to avoid getting anyone killed. It was to force the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime."

Yet the strategy of survival reappears, in the usual ways. When a tank battalion's commander learns that some enemy soldiers are playing dead, standing up to shoot after the tanks' main guns have passed, he decides to have his men "double-tap" all visible bodies—that is, to shoot the wounded and the dead, lest they prove to be a threat later. His officers and gunners put it into practice: "[A]nyone in an Iraqi uniform was going to die. It didn't matter that they were wounded or pretending to be dead." Because the US forces make their assault using a capital city's highways in the early morning, civilian cars are also on the highway on- and off-ramps, and when they can't be differentiated from enemy "technicals" and suicide cars, they must be destroyed. "Deep down, [the tankers] knew they were inadvertently killing civilians who had been caught up in the fight. They just didn't know how many. They knew only that any vehicle that kept coming at the column was violently eliminated."

John Keegan blames the civilians for not staying home.

> One of the most bewildering characteristics of this strange war was the apparent refusal of civilians to accept that a war was indeed going on. They drove about, in vehicles easily mistaken for the 'technicals' used by fighters, as if the Americans should understand that they were on a family outing or on their way to market, as they often were. The result was the spectacle of dead fathers or slaughtered children in bullet-riddled cars skewed across the roadway.

As in Mogadishu, when real danger presents itself, US methods turn truly annihilative. During the Baghdad fighting, Iraqi forces mounted counter-attacks at three crucial highway cloverleafs on Highway 8. The US fighters fired tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition, but still more attackers appeared, and the commanders began to fear the enemy might break their perimeters and overrun their positions. So they lowered their restraints. Residential buildings bordered the highway. It became necessary not only to shoot the visible enemy inside the windows, but to take down the buildings.

> Hornbuckle was concentrating on four- and five-story buildings to the northeast and the southwest, where RPG teams were able to fire straight down on his men dug into the cloverleaf. They were civilian buildings in a residential neighborhood, but under the rules of engagement they were now legitimate targets because they were being used by the enemy to attack American forces. Hornbuckle had first ordered his Bradley crews to fire high-explosive Twenty-five Mike Mike straight through the windows, where he could see the RPG teams firing and moving. . . .
>
> The captain had his mortar team fire. . . . The mortars chopped the buildings down, floor by floor.
>
> Then Hornbuckle called in the Paladins, the 155 mm artillery batteries set up south of the brigade command center. Their ninety-five-pound shells tore into two of the buildings, leveling both structures.

With the threat continuing from neighborhoods along the route, the commander of China Battalion, Lt. Colonel Stephen Twitty, gives an order to stop asking for orders, and just bring mortar fire down on the residential neighborhoods. If you sense a threat, he orders, "Just level it. Take it down. Call artillery." He will end any threat to his men—no matter who may be in those neighborhoods.

MY CONCERN, HOWEVER, is actually mostly with the enemy fighters, however loathsome a portion of them were, however grateful we are when American lives are protected, however necessary it was that the Saddam regime lose, and lose as quickly as possible.

Why should it matter when killing is as one-sided as this? It may seem a perverse exercise to say which specimens of military killing qualify as war, and which others do not. I know it will seem equally perverse to militarists and pacifists.

Some people claim that war is just the application of force to another group until it submits. Ideal war then tends towards a totality of violence. Clausewitz began the tradition of modern thinking in this vein. Though he understood war's motives to be based in state policy, he believed war's prosecution tended inevitably toward the "extreme," toward limitlessness. This is often called a "realist" position.

The first thing you have to believe, to view war differently, is simply that war is a distinct, longstanding human enterprise, bound by rules. Our ordinary language holds to this, in retaining such distinctions as those between war and massacre. The rules of war, too, grant immunity from violence to those who surrender, are wounded, or are taken prisoner. The rationale is simple—anyone who cannot provide a threat is no longer subject to killing.

Certain actions which seem morally allowable along the progress toward their perfection, when their goal is possible rather than actual, may became disallowable if they ever reach that goal. Every general in history may have dreamed of a war in which he killed all of his enemies without a single death among his own men. But the dreamed-of situation was never attainable, and its unattainability was crucial to war's ethical acceptability. Once the US can annihilate large percentages of our foes in war with minimal losses to ourselves, we have entered a different moral universe.

One of the peculiarities of the newest US technologies of war is that they make enemy soldiers resemble disarmed persons or prisoners of war. At the start of the war in Afghanistan, the US quickly destroyed all Taliban defenses against high-altitude aerial assault. The US then began bombing Taliban soldiers. We killed Taliban soldiers sitting in "front line" positions. We destroyed personnel in rear supply positions. The US at no time stood to the front or rear: only above. Our pilots stayed out of range of any threat these soldiers could present them. A ground force had not entered Afghanistan. It is a paradox of technology to make armed combatants as helpless before our weapons as the categories of disarmed soldiers whom it would be unlawful to kill.

Elaine Scarry once defined war as a reciprocal contest of injuring. Behind any military conflict, she agreed with Clausewitz, lies a crisis of policy, as one group wants to compel another to accept its will. But how should it be, Scarry asked, that wars can be won or lost between populations in a way that prepares each side to rewrite its deepest ideologies, or remake the constitution of its society—and all because of an action so uncivilized and terrible as the maiming and killing of soldiers in war? As occurred in Japan and Germany in 1945, and as we are hoping will occur in Iraq in 2004 (also, we should note, as occurred in the United States at the end of the Vietnam War), societies wind up changing their beliefs and self-conceptions because of the outcome of a contest that seems to "realists" to have to do only with killing power.

This model of war requires mechanisms of consent by which a population can support or isolate its fighting representatives. In a liberal democracy like the United States, those are the mechanisms of a free press and representative government. In any loose or undemocratic state, they may simply be the power of the populace to provide or withdraw shelter, to respect fighters' secrecy or hand them over to the enemy.

But it also may be the case that any war which produces a lasting settlement might need two-sidedness—need, that is, the sense that a war actually occurred, a contest of representatives, with the real power to hurt each other, and recognize and count their losses, and equally be subject to the odd combination of skill, strength, and blind luck that means the battle is not always to the strong. It might also require time for campaigns to be drawn out, as two populations observe the mayhem and ask themselves if the deaths are worth it—whether, that is, the ideas and principles incarnated in the fighters were worth the loss and pain, or whether to change ideas.

Some wars end without ending, and without producing a state of peace or stability, as is the case today in Somalia, Afghanistan, and—so far—in Iraq. These failures either result from an incomplete eradication of the "enemy," as the US government and its military spokesmen tend to declare, or from the defective and permanent "tribal culture" of peoples not organized on liberal-democratic lines, as pundits inform us. But one also has to ask whether the manner of carrying out a war, when the war is not quite a war, might somehow undermine the permanence of any settlement.

ON MAY 1 of last year, George W. Bush flew to an aircraft carrier and unfurled his banner: "Mission accomplished." Major combat operations were over. The war against the Iraqi government was done. Saddam's government was destroyed.

The paradox is that we began to see the crucial conditions of war return only when war was declared over—in an occupation that the US had not prepared for, and that we citizens are slowly coming to recognize and understand. We return to war, in some form, at a moment when war is unacknowledged—when an exchange of deaths, a slow and visible process, undoes the one-sidedness of our glorious, barely visible three-week war last March and April.

In mid-April of 2003, tens of thousands of Iraqis protested against an occupation, but that was lost in the end of what we had declared to be our war, while we were preparing to declare it over. US troops fired on the demonstrators twice in three days, killing at least fifteen and wounding seventy-five. Back in April, the first revenge attack was reported in Fallujah—and this news, too, was lost. The US and UK finally declared themselves "occupying powers" in May, seeking the protection of international law to take temporary control of Iraqi oil supplies. By mid-June 2003, the drip of dead Americans, ambushed or bombed, had begun. Attacks on US soldiers during the fall, Patrick Graham recently reported in *Harper's*, reached "roughly fifty per day" in Al Anbar province alone. By January of this year, 2004, says Rick Atkinson of the *Washington Post*, US forces were suffering an attack, on average, every forty-one minutes. Whatever the frequency of attacks, as of this writing, 810 American soldiers have been killed in Iraq, only 108 of them during the three-week war. Nearly 4700 have been wounded—some of them grievously, we know, since US medicine can stop death and undo wounds but can't save exploded arms and legs, which have to be replaced with artificial limbs.

"Heroes without war" acquires another meaning when US troops fight so remarkably, and against such weak states, that a "war" can be held to twenty-one days, too short a time for anyone to understand what is occurring, too quick a sequence of battles to be meaningfully represented by the press. In Iraq, it made too compressed a victory for either the defeated population or the victors to learn whom they would be living with in the odd intimate proximity of an occupied nation and a distant foreign power—as we shipped our reserve troops and entrepreneurial citizens to the Middle East to speed the transformation.

We began to learn, however. And so did the Iraqis. By observing the Americans, Iraqi insurgents could see firsthand how much we watch each of our military lives. The Iraqis could not kill our best fighters in a planned war. But it didn't matter who a dead American was. It didn't matter, in the occupation, if the person killed was a fuel convoy driver, an Army Reservist rotated from weekend training to overseas duty, a National Guardsman who usually protects the USA from natural disasters, or a Marine patrolling the street.

No Iraqi can face off against our frontline fighters. And it doesn't matter if the American is not faced down. He or she can now be blown up by what even the press calls an IED, an "improvised explosive device"—an old artillery shell, for example, wired with a fuse. A highway full of booby-traps, like a barrage of carelessly fired mortar rounds, will eventually hit someone. And the new deaths are added to the balance sheet of American lives, each one mattering more than fifty or a hundred Iraqi fighters in our calculus. So Americans' higher register of life can be used against us. A steady hemorrhaging of lives, one or two a day, could force our recognition of the opposite side, whom the American fighters still find unintelligible, and whom the American public hears about only as "dead-enders," "foreigners," and "terrorists."

The act of mutilation—performed by boys and townspeople, though the ambush was arranged by fighters—is a way of getting us to see what we Americans value most, as we watch it be undone. We respect "clean" killing; here is filthy mistreatment of the already dead. In Mogadishu, the special forces soldiers watched the mutilation of their comrades' bodies on a barracks television. "What kind of animals . . . ?" they thought.

> The pilots wanted to get up over those crowds and mow them down, just mow them all down. Fuck the whole lot of them. Then land and recover the bodies. These were American soldiers. . . . Garrison and Montgomery [their commanders] said no. There were big crowds around those bodies. It would be a massacre.

The massacre would have meant nothing. All the soldiers cared about were the bodies. In Fallujah, six civilians and a journalist had been shot dead by US troops the Friday before the mutilations. No one noticed. *You who do not wish to see us*, the mutilators cursed, waving their computer-printed signs in the air, *we will show you what you are like.*

Ironically, several weeks before the mutilations, the Marines had been brought in to replace the 82nd Airborne in part because they were more polite, more decent, closer to the ground in their fighting methods than the paratroopers they replaced, more likely to win "hearts and minds." Then the mutilations occurred. The Marines joined a battle more like Mogadishu than anything that had occurred in Iraq during the actual war. Reports have been spotty and contradictory. The Marine tactic in Fallujah seems to have been to enter the city to draw fire, then pulverize the sources of fire. Close air support was used in neighborhoods inside the city, from Cobra helicopters launching Hellfire missiles, to cannon-firing AC-130 gunships, to bombs from F-16s. The director of the Fallujah General Hospital reported 600 people killed and 1,200 wounded in one week. He said the majority were civilians; the Marines insisted ninety-five percent were "military age males."

April proved to be the bloodiest month for American forces since the war. One hundred thirty-five soldiers died and 1100 more were wounded. The Fallujah insurgency continued a year-long chronology of Sunni Muslim resistance. Simultaneously, however, the Shiite Muslim forces of Muqtada al-Sadr and his anti-American Mahdi Army were rising against US troops in Najaf, Karbala, and elsewhere. Twelve Marines were killed in a single seven-hour firefight in Ramadi on April 6—nearly two-thirds of the number killed in the long-ago fight in Mogadishu.

This occupation, in reassuming the condition of war, will change the self-conception of the Iraqis, or our own—if only we have the nerve to look steadily at it, and think. The United States is making a claim on what Iraq should be: secular, human-rights based, economically privatized and open to foreign investment, and as democratic as it can be while assuring permanent friendly ties with the US. When we make this claim backed by our military, we are also making claims about our United

States—for example, that we have the moral, national, and humanitarian authority to overthrow tyrannical governments in favor of democracy and free market economics.

The insurgents, in turn, are making claims about the way they want their own country to look: theocratic, Islamist rather than Western, traditionally repressive rather than egalitarian and rights-based, "Arab" rather than globalized, independent rather than occupied. They are also making claims about how they want the United States to be: not expansionist, not dominant, not spreading Western values, not capable of imposing rights-based freedoms, equality-based democracy, or free-market globalization.

And these conflicting conceptions—the "policy" at stake in our unwanted new war—will be deliberated upon by two whole populations, and not the jihadists and ideologues who started it, in that odd and terrible form of deliberation that is greased with lives, pain, suffering, and loss.

In this sense, "resolve" is a word that has been grossly misused in recent months, and yet is most relevant. The administration makes it mean resoluteness, a steadfast quality of refusing to change course in war regardless of events. The siege of Fallujah in April was even called "Operation Vigilant Resolve" or "Iron Resolve." Yet the word has a more honorable place in our democracy. It is the oral formula in which all acts of public deliberation are put forward, from town councils to the Congress: "Be it resolved, that . . ." The significance of a resolution is not its finality, but the fact that deliberation goes on. At this moment, war once again becomes a cause for thinking. The thinking will go on in public. Our administration's certainties are not America's. Our resolve is a public self-discovery that has yet to be made. +

Issue Two: Happiness

...is coming Valentine's Day, 2005

Afternoon of the Sex Children

Jewgreek is Greekjew: Emmanuel Lévinas to Alain Badiou

Why All the Hondas Look the Same

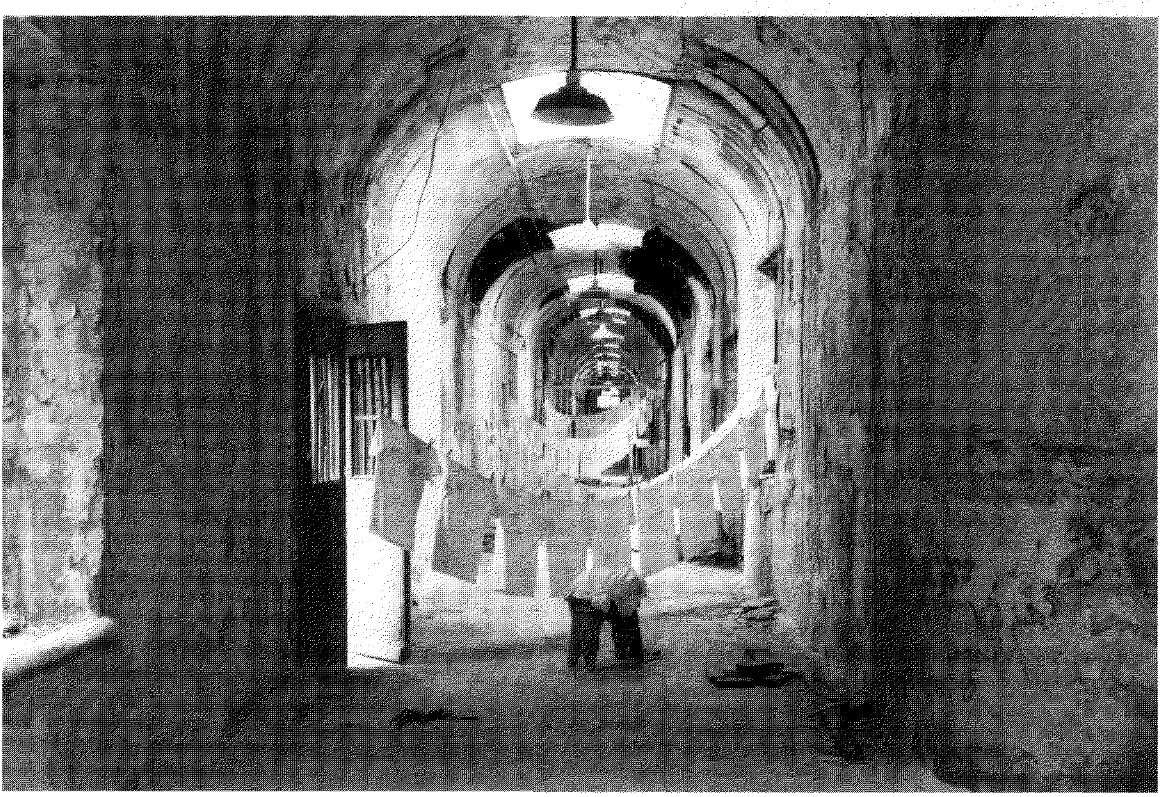
Christian Television

What They Don't Know About the Brain Won't Kill You

Radiohead; or, the Philosophy of Pop

The O.K.ers

more translation -- more fiction -- more reviews



Eastern State Penitentiary. Anna Moschovakis, ©2000

THE BLACK IRON PRISON

Joshua Glenn

The Happiness that Exploded

In "The Intelligent Coed's Guide to America," an essay from his 1976 collection *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine*, Tom Wolfe recounts one of his early rhetorical triumphs over the nay-saying nabobs of the American left. It seems that at a 1965 Princeton conference, he lost it when Günter Grass, Allen Ginsberg, and Paul Krassner started babbling about the specter of fascism in America: "Suddenly I heard myself blurting out over my microphone: 'My God, what are you talking about? We're in the middle of a . . . Happiness Explosion!'" According to Wolfe, a curious form of envy was the likeliest explanation for the "ghastly delight" intellectuals of the period took in depicting the land of the free as a gilded cage. "The European intellectuals have a real wasteland? Well, we have a psychological wasteland. They have real fascism? Well, we have social fascism," etc., he ventriloquizes with glee.

But Ginsberg, et al., were just a warm-up exercise for Wolfe, who immediately proceeded to dismiss a more intellectually pedigreed challenge: Herbert Marcuse's then-influential theory of "repressive tolerance." The former Frankfurt School theorist had warned of creeping, indirect totalitarianism in the United States. No longer did social domination rest upon authoritarian violence; rather, it depended on the individual's propensity to identify with and internalize the worldview of those in power. "This was an insidious system," snorts Wolfe, "through which the government granted meaningless personal freedoms in order to narcotize the pain of class repression, which only socialism could cure. Beautiful! Well-nigh flawless!"

Three decades later, Wolfe was still at it. In the 150th anniversary issue of *Harper's*, published not long before 9/11, he berated citizens of the "most powerful, prosperous, and popular nation of all time" for failing to celebrate the imperial glory of America: "an El Dorado where the average working man [had] the political freedom, the personal freedom, the money, and the free time to fulfill his potential in any way he saw fit." If Marcuse was no longer au courant, Wolfe found another European intellectual kook to mock. These days, he wrote, we were asked to believe that "the powers that be manipulate, with poisonous efficiency, the very language we speak in order to imprison us in an invisible panopticon, to use . . .

Michel Foucault's term." Foucault and his ilk were standing in the way of the greatest celebration ever! Just ask those regular folks, who, according to Wolfe's *Harper's* manifesto, voice their opposition to the snarkiness of intellectuals "at night, over cigarettes . . . muttering, grousing, grousing, muttering . . . all the while doubting their own common sense," which tells them there is no cause for alarm whatsoever, that America is really OK.

But in the wake of 9/11, a number of left-leaning intellectuals—particularly, though not exclusively, those who approved of the US military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq—have articulated a similar message of American OKness. Much like Wolfe, born-again liberals have repudiated those thinkers who ever dared suggest our country might somehow be, as the poet Heine put it (of America, in the early 1830s), a "monstrous prison of freedom" in which "invisible chains" weigh far more heavily upon unwitting inmates than visible ones ever did.

Richard Wolin's *The Seduction of Unreason* is a newly published treatise and tract investigating postmodernism's debt to proto-fascist ideas and attitudes. Along the way Wolin, a contributor to the *New Republic* and *Dissent* and the author of a study of Walter Benjamin, takes pains to make scathing remarks about an impressive variety of indirect-domination claims. These include: Marcuse's diagnosis of a one-dimensional society, T. W. Adorno's vision of a totally administered world, Foucault's argument that forces of governmentality have become adept at "inscribing" us in the clutches of power-knowledge, Jacques Derrida's concerns about the hegemonic force of the dominant discourse, and what Wolin calls Jean Baudrillard's verdict on the impossibility of progressive historical change.

Wolin rejects all such insidious-system claims not simply because they are "overtly cynical and empirically untenable," he writes, but because if the workings of power do persist in defiance of even the best-intentioned efforts to disrupt them, then "the emancipatory hopes of the vast majority of men and women seem consigned in advance to frustration and disappointment." To regard the Enlightenment's vision of the future with skepticism, cynicism, irony, or contempt is to be left, he says, "dazed and disoriented—morally and politically defenseless." Wolin's argument against indirect-domination claims is in effect an inversion of Wolfe's. Because social inequality and class injustice have at last been overcome, according to Wolfe, we should stop imagining that America is an invisible-prison state. Wolin's point is that we should stop imagining that America is an invisible-prison state because those same problems have yet to be overcome.

We should always be nervous when ideological enemies agree on anything. Wolin's book points out how disturbing it is that arguments once the prerogative of the counterrevolutionary right should have attained a new lease on life among the postmodernist left. I propose that glib denunciations of indirect-domination claims tossed off with equal aplomb by reactionaries like Wolfe and progressives like Wolin are just as troubling. In fact, it wasn't ivory-tower leftists and poststructuralists who dreamed up indirect-domination theory—it was thinkers closer to the ground, outsider intellectuals with bizarre, unclassifiable politics. There exists what some might call a Secret History of Invisible-Prison Theory, one that reached its rhetorical apotheosis so far not in the scholarly writings of Adorno, Marcuse, Foucault, or Baudrillard, but in the outré poetry of Baudelaire and the pulp science fiction of Philip K. Dick. This history begins, according to my own research, in the early 19th century. Let's take a look.

BIG BROTHER VOUS REGARDE

Between the publication of the first and second volumes of *Democracy in America*, in 1835 and 1840 respectively, Alexis de Tocqueville's tone became increasingly foreboding. If in the first volume of the Frenchman's study of the democratic spirit of the age he'd praised American democracy as the antidote to political tyranny, in the second he warned of a new, subtler form of tyranny emerging from America itself, where intangible but inexorable pressures threatened to force even staunch individualists into a formerly unthinkable conformity.

Unlike domination elsewhere, where extra-economic coercion had to be employed to keep citizens in line, it appeared to Tocqueville that the social order of the United States was regulated to a great extent by what he called the American "spirit of gain." Sure, the new ideals of individualism and equality that were supplanting Europe's hierarchical and communal values were fostered, just as Adam Smith had predicted, by participation in an open economy. But it was precisely the self-centered individuals of such an economy, hastening to secure their own pleasures regardless of the greater good, who were most likely to surrender their liberty to a paternalistic government, predicted Tocqueville. Much like his contemporary Marx, who scoffed at the bourgeois canard that capitalism was the greatest freedom history would ever know, Tocqueville warned that liberal capitalism might become an insidious form of bondage for worker and capitalist alike.

At times the second volume of *Democracy in America* reads like a gothic novel of demonic possession—or a Cold War sci-fi novel about the invasion of puppet-master aliens. "In democratic nations, the general public . . . possesses a singular power, of which no aristocratic nation can even conceive," Tocqueville intones, in the Library of America's new translation. "Rather than persuade people of its beliefs, it imposes them, it permeates men's souls with them through the powerful pressure that the mind of all exerts on the intelligence of each." Since intellectual authority in a democracy comes neither from outside mankind (God), nor from an elite class, the disposition to believe in public opinion, to accept it without question, increases. If everyone is equally enlightened, then truth should lie with the greatest number, goes the thinking.

The end result? A future society in which the opinion of the majority will impel the individual, despite having "smashed all the shackles" of political tyranny, "willingly to cease thinking at all"—that is, to submit to shackles worn not on the limbs but inside the head. In a cryptic footnote reminding us that his own political sympathies were not entirely democratic, Tocqueville suggested that the solution to the either/or of feudalist aristocracy and liberal capitalism might be an "aristocratic republic" in which ordinary citizens experienced a certain political and economic liberty but the unpossessable aristocracy would continue to guide society.

In one of the concluding chapters, Tocqueville expresses his deepest fear: If democracy and the spirit of capitalism had made it possible to establish a despotism in America "more extensive and more mild" than any in antiquity, he asks, then what was to stop a European ruler from combining authoritarian sovereignty with liberal capitalism and thereby becoming powerful enough to "dictate and manage the lives of each and every one" of his subjects, controlling the minutest details of social life and of individual existence? The terms "despotism" and "tyranny" wouldn't suffice to describe such oppression, one spreading "a fine mesh of uniform, minute, and complex rules" over society, Tocqueville warns, and every day making "man's use of his free will rarer and more futile." He declines to name this emergent social order, which bears a strong resemblance to what the critic Clarke Cooper has termed "neototalitarianism"—which may indeed strive "to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual," as Hannah Arendt puts it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but which employs carrots instead of sticks to do so, without any recourse to loyalty oaths, concentration camps, or the like. Let's call it an invisible prison.

THE UNNORMALIZED MAN

Tocqueville and Heine, along with such victims and critics of the literary marketplace as Edgar Allan Poe and Gérard de Nerval, were merely warm-up acts and inspirations for the artist and thinker I consider the original invisible-prison theorist: Charles Baudelaire. If Foucault is correct to propose that social command in early 19th-century France was no longer simply authoritarian, but had of late begun to operate through a diffuse network (fine mesh) of unspoken rules "normalizing" (permeating men's souls with) certain customs, habits, and parameters of thought—rules internalized by those incarcerated in "disciplinary institutions" such as prisons, mental hospitals, factories, and universities—then perhaps we might call Baudelaire, who was kicked out of high school while Tocqueville was writing the second volume of *Democracy in America*, and who never again set foot in a disciplinary institution, Europe's unnormalized man.

During his lifetime, Baudelaire was dismissed as an aesthete—an amoral, apolitical, shallowly ironical fop whose collected poems, as one influential reviewer put it at the time, amounted to nothing more than "a strange sort of kiosk, very ornate and artificial but yet elegant and mysterious, where Poe is read, [and] where the intoxicating effects of hashish are sought as a subject of rational analysis, and where opium and a thousand abominable drugs are drunk in precious porcelain cups." Ever since, those who've found his thoroughgoing criticisms of the politics, economics, and culture of liberal capitalism not to their liking have mischaracterized Baudelaire in the same way. Wolin, for example, complains that Foucault offers no recourse to those who "seek to disentangle themselves from power's omnivorous maw" except to engage in "alternative cultural practices—such as, following the lead of Nietzsche and Baudelaire, the choice of a beautiful life—that might temporarily outwit power's totalizing grasp." Without question, he was an aesthete and a fop—but he was more than that. Baudelaire was an engaged ironist, a politicized dandy unable to shake the sensation that the liberalized "bourgeois monarchy" of Louis-Philippe he was to endure until 1848 was, in some insidious fashion, a new mode of tyranny.

A handful of 20th-century critics cynical about liberalism recognized the impetus behind Baudelaire's writing, but they were already too far inside the notion of the invisible prison to bring it out as a consistent organizing principle of his work, or to articulate its implications except in the jargon of their own liberatory agendas, Marxist, messianic, or schizo-Deleuzian. But to take Baudelaire neat is to be forever altered. His hysterical overidentification with Poe, who in an obituary he called a martyr for whom "America was nothing more than a vast prison which he traversed with the feverish agitation of a being made to breathe a sweeter air"; his *flâneurie* and contempt for the "Bostonian" ideal of utility in all affairs; his philosophical writing on the effect of drugs; his idiosyncratic appropriation of Romantic clichés of spleen and ennui; his reasoned, ascetic meta-dandyism; suddenly it all makes sense! In Baudelaire's lucid, horrified understanding, the laissez-faire capitalism championed by the umbrella-toting Citizen-King and his chief minister, Guizot—for whom "*Enrichissez-vous*" served as a post-ideological solution to every social problem—entailed a soft terror, a bourgeois authoritarianism more ruthless than anything feudalism had dished out: One had to make oneself useful, operational, commensurable, or else disappear. What Tocqueville thought might come to pass in America, Baudelaire claimed was already the case in France. Every word he wrote was a protest against this inexorable, totalizing state of affairs.

Marx, who was writing his early, philosophical manuscripts in Paris at the very moment Baudelaire was penning his first poems, may have believed the only way humanity could emancipate itself from the seamless machinations of bourgeois capitalism was through the overthrow of the whole system by the one class that had no stake in it, but Baudelaire labored under no such illusion. A neither/nor (or negative-dialectical, to use Adorno's term) rather than a dialectical thinker, he intuited that Enlightenment-style dialectical mediation and reconciliation was less a promise of future revolution than it was the achieved reality of bourgeois society. The genius of the middle classes who'd come to power along with Louis-Philippe, Baudelaire recognized, was their knack for relocating coercion within spontaneity, authority within liberty. His 1862 prose poem "To Each His Chimera," in which the narrator encounters a line of men shambling nowhere, each obliged to view the world through the eyes (literally) of a puppet-master creature clinging to his shoulders, and each not despairing but "condemned to hope forever," is an enduring parable about both the ideology of progress and the unlikelihood of anti-capitalist revolution.

Instead of speaking on behalf of the working classes, then, Baudelaire cast his lot with the *déclassés* of Paris, those unrevolutionary types whom Marx would dismiss as "decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie . . . , vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets . . . *literati*, organ-grinders, ragpickers . . . in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*." If those who toiled in factories and those who employed them were equally inmates in an invisible prison, Baudelaire preferred to breathe sweeter air among society's unpossessable losers. (Adorno approvingly interprets Baudelairean *décadence* as "the reverse image of the false purposefulness of industry.") But instead of adopting the fake-authentic lifestyle favored by those of his fellow middle-class dropouts given—then, as now—to sporting proletarian garb and shaggy beards, Baudelaire racked up lifelong debts with tailors and bootmakers in order to transform himself into the ultimate antibohemian. Why did he take absurd pains with his appearance? Perhaps it was for the same reason that those who ended up surviving Stalin's gulags and Hitler's concentration camps are said to have carefully combed their hair and tied their shoes every day—because that's what it takes.

And what of Baudelaire's artificial paradises? Walter Benjamin once described the Baudelairean hashish eater's demands on time and space as being "absolutely regal"; borrowing Tocqueville's term, and recalling Baudelaire's participation in the 1848 revolution, I might amend "regal" to "aristocratic-republican." Baudelaire's ennui (his morbid fascination with ticking clocks and tolling bells), as well as his spleen (the sensation he experienced of being crushed under an overcast sky, or penned in by raindrops forming cell bars), can be understood as a neurasthenic reaction to newly emergent liberal-capitalist despotism. If Baudelaire refused to resign himself to the subjective tyranny of time and space, it was because —as Marcuse, who praises him as an avatar of "the revolt against culture based on toil, domination, and renunciation," suggests—such resignation is "society's most natural ally in maintaining law and order, conformity, and the institutions that relegate freedom to a perpetual utopia." Baudelaire's *flâneurie* was street theater performed for the bustling downtown crowd—an advertisement for *extase*, freedom from clock time. As for his oddly nonsexual notion of *volupté*, for Baudelaire the term signified a thrilling escape into tropical spacelessness. Though drugs also offer *extase* and *volupté*, Baudelaire claimed they are rarely worth the hangover.

None of the above might appear to indicate that Richard Wolin is wrong about Baudelaire, that the poet offered anything but stratagems by which one might temporarily outwit power's totalizing grasp. Yet Baudelaire's writings—and his eccentric espousal of both reactionary and anarchistic politics—have proven unsettling to liberals and conservatives alike. This was particularly the case at the height of the Cold War, when at least one neoconservative ideologue felt compelled repeatedly to castigate the long-dead poet for having almost single-handedly prevented the irrevocable triumph of liberal capitalism.

COLD WAR EL DORADO

Written at a time when his own midcentury pronouncement of the End of Ideology no longer seemed self-evident, Daniel Bell's 1969-70 manuscript "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism," portions of which would be published as individual essays and later collected in a volume of that same title, lamented that Baudelaire's sensibility "undermines the [middle-class] social structure itself by striking at the motivational and psychic-reward system which has sustained it."

Although Bell quotes Max Weber's theory that cultural values can exercise a powerful influence over society's economic arrangements, he does not remind readers that, according to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05), the bureaucratization and rationalization of all aspects of life by the state and its agencies was transforming modern society into an "iron cage." (Nor does Bell quote a letter written a few years later by a teenage André Breton attributing to Baudelaire's poetry the capacity to "undermine the walls of the real that enclose us"—i.e., the invisible prison.) Although Bell has often described himself as a socialist in economics, at the end of the 1970s he was concerned to refute the pernicious notion that there was any alternative to liberal capitalism. Just months before Ronald Reagan was elected president, Bell complained in an introduction to the paperback edition of *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* that if cultural modernism is "the agency for the dissolution of the bourgeois world view," then Baudelaire was the avatar of modernism itself.

Today, of course, America's motivational and psychic-reward system is once again firing on all cylinders, and Bell's hand-wringing over "The Sensibility of the Sixties," as one chapter of his book was titled, seems risible. But the Baudelairean sensibility was taken very seriously indeed in some quarters back then, as we learned recently with the publication of Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War*. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, it transpires, Bell's research was funded directly and indirectly by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a philanthropic outfit later exposed as a front for a CIA operation charged with nudging the Western intelligentsia away from its fascination with alternatives to the American Way. As a young Trotskyist, Bell had studied the means by which the structures of the dominant social order are, in the terminology of Marxian ideology critique, "naturalized," "historicized," and "eternalized"; it would have been a cinch, then, for him to assist the CIA in making liberal capitalism appear not merely superior to all other past, present, or future political and economic arrangements, but the natural, historically inevitable, and eternal order of things.

Dwight Macdonald, one of the few New York Intellectuals kept in the dark about the Congress for Cultural Freedom, doubtless because instead of having become a neoconservative after World War II he remained an oddball anarchist-cum-cultural mandarin, nevertheless instinctively criticized the Congress's project when he complained, in a 1958 letter to Bell (who in a review had chuckled indulgently over a collection of Macdonald's political essays), that "I don't see why a drastic rejection of what is necessarily means pure-heart-but-wooly-wit; in fact, I think I am the one that has tried to think and to analyze quite objectively, and that you . . . may simply be unwilling to go beyond a certain point in 'facing up to things,' that point being the farthest reach of conventionality." What Macdonald—who in 1966 would quote Baudelaire's Poe obituary at the funeral of Delmore Schwartz—didn't appear to realize was that his former comrade was acting as a mouthpiece not for anything so harmless as conventionality but for liberal-capitalist ideology itself. Bell's indulgent tone echoed the dominant discourse, which always laughs off challenges to what is.

Macdonald, who was in those days sleepwalking through a limbo period between the demise of his antiwar journal *Politics* and his role (along with Ginsberg) as godfather to the Yippies, certainly suspected that America was becoming an invisible prison. His polemics against the peddlers of Masscult and Midcult—borrowing from and complementing, as they did, Adorno's critique of the culture industry—were motivated not by snobbery but by a conviction that "the tendency of modern industrial society, whether in the USA or the USSR, is to transform the individual into the mass man," and that totalitarian propagandists had nothing on the Book of the Month Club. But perhaps Macdonald had become too comfortable at the *New Yorker* and *Esquire* to do more than carp a little. The Cold War intellectual who picked up where Baudelaire left off was a true outsider: the sci-fi author Philip K. Dick.

WELCOME TO THE GARRISON PLANET

On February 3, 1974, a relatively drug-free Dick suddenly experienced a flood of hallucinatory visions for no apparent reason. This terrifying experience suggested to him that the far-out theories he'd advanced since the 1950s in his politically and epistemologically paranoid stories and pulp novels—which by then amounted to nearly 50 titles, including *Solar Lottery*, *The World Jones Made*, *Eye in the Sky*, *The Man Who Japed*, *Time Out of Joint*, *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *We Can Build You*, *Martian Time-Slip*, *The Game-Players of Titan*, *The Simulacra*, *Now Wait for Last Year*, *The Crack in Space*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *The Zap Gun*, *The Penultimate Truth*, *The Unteleported Man*, *Counter-Clock World*, *The Ganymede Takeover*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Ubik*, *A Maze of Death*, *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said*, and *A Scanner Darkly*—were, in fact, completely and utterly true.

Did the ideas in these books add up to a single, overarching theory? In the remaining eight years of his life Dick devoted thousands of pages of his "Exegesis," a journal explicating the "2-3-74" epiphany, to answering that question. Like the bewildered characters in his novels, Dick tested out conjecture after conjecture, each one "more cunning, more exciting, and more fucked," as he put it, than the one before. Although he found none of these ultimately satisfying, there was a common thread. As he would write in the "Exegesis," on 2-3-74 he was lifted "from the limitations of the space-time matrix," and instantly recognized that "the world around me was cardboard, a fake" — that it was, in fact, a "Black Iron Prison" (BIP, for short). In that instant, Dick recounts, he felt impelled to take on "in battle, as a champion of all human spirits in thrall, every evil, every Iron Imprisoning Thing."

A year later, Dick was afforded yet another vision, this time of a "Palm Tree Garden" (PTG), a this-worldly paradise he sometimes described as "that other way of being-in-the-world." Unlike Foucault—whose *Discipline and Punish*, written around the time of the events of 2-3-74, likens contemporary society to an inescapable "carceral archipelago"—Dick was convinced that there remains "a good world under the evil." He claimed: "The evil is somehow superimposed over it." I'd suggest that readers turn to Dick's philosophical utterances from the 1970s to learn more, but the "Exegesis" is tiring even to diehard fans, and in interviews from this period Dick drones on in an amphetamine-fueled haze. Instead, let's take a look at one of Dick's lesser-known efforts to write against the BIP, *Lies, Inc.*, originally called *The Unteleported Man.*

In this book (a 1964 novella in the pulp magazine *Fantastic* that Dick dusted off in 1979 to reissue as a full-length novel, finally published in America only this year), an atomic war between the United States and the Soviet Union has led to UN rule of the planet, renamed Terra. The UN's Secretary-General, German-born Horst Bertold, is a "heavy man, red-haired . . . . His features were small but his shoulders, his arms and his ribcage, bulged, as if from countless steam baths and handball." If this reminds you of the new governor of California, don't worry: Bertold turns out to be one of the good guys. The villain is Theodoric Ferry, chairman of "one of the most powerful economic syndromes in the Sol system," a capitalist mogul whose bodyguards are charged with correcting his frequent malapropisms. Noting that Ferry has to be "reminded, constantly, of the most commonplace Terran linguistic patterns," Freya Holm, an agent with the private police agency Listening Instructional Educational Services (LIES), Inc., speculates that he may be an alien. But whether or not Ferry has been misunderestimated the reader is left to decide.

Lies, Inc. forces us to grapple with the impossibility of ever deciding between truth and falsehood, reality and unreality. We learn, for example, that "subinformation" was beamed into the mind of one Rachmael Ben Applebaum. He is the owner of an outer-space freighter company that went bankrupt when Telpor, a teleportation device, was invented by Ferry's Berlin-based company and used to transport millions of emigrants to Whale's Mouth, the universe's only other inhabitable planet, a Garden of Eden where Terrans can start over. Applebaum wonders why Telpor is a one-way device—why there is no returning from Whale's Mouth—and suspects there's something sinister about Ferry's operation; at the same time, he suspects that these paranoid ideas were inserted into his head. Still, he decides to investigate Ferry's "economic multi-pseudopodia empire" by traveling across space on an eighteen year voyage that will make him the only unteleported man on Whale's Mouth—even though he knows the solo trip will likely drive him insane. The arrival of the unteleported man is like that of the philosopher who descends into Plato's cave only to invite ridicule from the cave's prisoners, who are convinced that their world of flickering shadows is in fact the real one.

In the end, Whale's Mouth turns out to be neither a paradise nor, as Applebaum suspected, a Nazi-style death camp, but a "barracks planet" or "garrison state" on the Soviet model. By forcing Terran emigrants to work in factories Ferry is training them to submit to the will of the state; he intends to transport them back to Terra (it's not a one-way trip after all) and conquer the planet. Thanks to the combined efforts of the UN and Lies, Inc., Terrans learn that the PTG is a BIP: "For one single, limited episode the curtain had been lifted, the people of Terra had received . . . a picture of the actuality underlying the elaborate, complicated myth." In the process, Applebaum gets teleported and is shot by Ferry's troops with an LSD dart; he wakes up in a group-therapy clinic—a Foucauldian disciplinary institution whose patients are required to admit to themselves that there is no barracks planet, that the Black Iron Prison is merely an "alternate distorted subreality." The UN, meanwhile, attempts to defeat Ferry via a mind-control device of their own: a pulp sci-fi novel about Whale's Mouth.

Written shortly before Wolfe's encounter with Grass, Ginsberg, and Krassner, *Lies, Inc.*—like so many of Dick's other novels and stories—suggests that what *is* may not be what it seems, that in a liberal capitalist society, freedom and coercion exist in dialectical synthesis, that in a democracy the dominant discourse permeates men's souls through mass culture and disciplinary institutions alike, and that our only recourse against the invisible prison is to expose its machinations. If Dick expressed crackpot theories like these without fear of reprisal, it's because—like Baudelaire—he was a loser, a failure, an outsider.

Against the Tyranny of Concrete Reality

In a 1974 essay titled "Who is an SF Writer?" Dick explains the advantage of working in a despised medium. The science-fiction author "is able to dissolve the normal absolute quality that the objects (our actual environment, our daily routine) have," he writes. "He has cut us loose enough to put us in a third space, neither the concrete nor the abstract, but something unique, something connected to both and hence relevant . . . . The daily tyranny of our immediate world, which we generally succumb to, becoming passive in the hands of and accepting as immutable, this is broken, this tyranny of concrete reality." For "science-fiction author," read "invisible-prison theorist," and you'll understand why—like anarchists and monarchists—they are at once laughable and infuriating to liberals and conservatives alike.

I submit that Baudelaire, Dick, and most other invisible-prison theorists are onto something. Nor am I alone in this opinion. In 1989, Pierre Bourdieu called for writers and intellectuals to act as a "critical countervailing power" to neoliberalism's "symbolic domination"—i.e., to the invisible prison. Bourdieu suspected that the symbolic end of the Cold War that year would make it all the more difficult for citizens of liberal capitalist societies to shrug off the chimera of progress. "Is the economic world really, as the dominant discourse would have us believe, a pure and perfect order, implacably unfolding the logic of its predictable consequences . . . ?" he demanded in a later essay. "What if it were, in reality, only the implementation of a utopia, neoliberalism . . . which, with the aid of the economic theory to which it subscribes, manages to see itself as the scientific description of reality?" Life in America under the current administration, whose aim it is to export liberal capitalism and render dissent unthinkable, confirms his fears.

And since 1989? Who during the Happiness Explosion of the 1990s committed career suicide and braved ridicule by voyaging—unpossessable and ridiculous, for what seemed an eternity—far from the disciplinary clutches of alt.culture bohemia and tenure-track transgressiveness? What unteleported souls, pratfalling through the fine mesh of normalizing rules woven about us, are even now keeping the flame of skepticism, cynicism, irony, and contempt burning, despite the risk of winding up on a crypto-McCarthyite snarkwatch list? Who will, in the years to come, protest not merely "Empire" but the subjective tyranny of ennui, spleen, and the space-time matrix itself?

Solo invisible-prison theorists and outsider intellectuals, to be sure—I know they're out there somewhere. But Dick suggests another, slightly less lonely possibility when, in *Lies, Inc.*, he mentions the existence of a band of kooks whose newsletter warns Terrans to distrust received wisdom and commonsense impressions about the way things are. Aha! From Tocqueville's opposition newspaper *Le Commerce* and Baudelaire's unrealized journal *Le Hibou Philosophe* to *Politics* and *Dissent* and even sci-fi journals like *Fantastic,* to *Hermenaut* and the *Baffler* and others, the answer is: independent magazines like this one. *Avanti!* +

On sale in hardcover
November 2004

The extraordinary
true story of
two remarkable
women forced
to make choices
in a troubled time.

Ester and
Ruzya

HOW MY GRANDMOTHERS
SURVIVED HITLER'S WAR
AND STALIN'S PEACE

By Masha Gessen

"Beautifully written and deeply felt . . . Gessen's description of the compromises people made to survive should force those of us living in a luckier era to think harder about what we mean by 'morality.'"

—Anne Applebaum,
Pulitzer Prize-winning
author of *Gulag*

THE DIAL PRESS

www.dialpress.com

CONSTELLATION

SOFA
GODSPEED YOU! BLACK EMPEROR
EXHAUST
DO MAKE SAY THINK
SACKVILLE
FLY PAN AM
SILVER MT. ZION
FRANKIE SPARO
1-SPEED BIKE
RE:
HANGEDUP
POLMO POLPO
ELIZABETH ANKA VAJAGIC
BLACK OX ORKESTAR

CSTRECORDS.COM
1997-2004

REVIEWS

AGE OF CHIVALRY NOT OVER, FRENCH DOCTOR SAYS.

Jean-Christophe Rufin. *Rouge Brésil.*
Gallimard. August 2001.
(Translation forthcoming as *Brazil Red.*
W. W. Norton. September 2004.)

A CONTEMPORARY BALZAC would do well to write a series of stories about Doctors Without Borders. Like that society of benevolents in *La Comédie Humaine*, the Brothers of Consolation—ranged against the other secret societies of criminals, capitalists, and libertines like Vautrin's band or the fantastic Thirteen—*Medecins Sans Frontières* functions according to a series of Catholic, professional, and aristocratic principles. They do good work without evangelizing; they are dedicated to the craft of healing under difficult and dangerous conditions; and, most importantly for our would-be Balzac, the individuals involved have converted their ability and will for good into political and social power. Their ranks have produced a French minister of health, Bernard Kouchner, and now, in Jean-Christophe Rufin, a winner of the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize. For all the half-true talk of the French political class's rigidity, French society does allow its professionals and intellectuals the kind of upward or lateral social mobility that America's electorate only confers upon movie stars and sports heros (Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Steve Largent) or professionals willing to adopt the mindset of CEOs (Dr. Bill Frist). As a private society that encourages its members to assume power beyond the limited aims of the group, Doctors Without Borders is undeniably better than Skull and Bones, but members of both share a constant tension between an ideal of virtuous action and the gratifications of ambition and egotism. This tension is a curious historical leftover of an aristocratic consciousness; those with the power and skills to help should do so, but the awareness of obligation is never separate from a sense of superiority. They are better than you because they act, and they will not let you forget it when you receive the envelope asking you to make a symbolic contribution while they do the real work.

Something of this superiority seeps into Rufin's pose as a dilletante novelist. Rufin is less a writer than a modern man of action cut in the mold of Richard Francis Burton, T. E. Lawrence, and André Malraux (whose mantle of world traveler, popular novelist, and political celebrity he is poised to inherit). He admits to the *New York Times* that he writes primarily to entertain himself. It's hard to begrudge a hard-working doctor his bit of fun, and if, in the manner of the ancien régime, Rufin passes his leisure hours writing novels when the rest of us are wind-surfing or watching TV, so much the better for him.

But let's not congratulate him too quickly. Novel writing, especially in France, may have begun as a leisure activity of aristocrats, often emerging out of salon parlor games. Now novelists have attained something close to the same professional status of lawyers or accountants. The amateur who sets himself up as a professional, competing for prizes, cash, advances, and, presumably, film rights, cannot be given a free pass or a round of applause for trying. His leisure takes bread out of other people's mouths. As fewer French novels make it into English with each passing year, those that do had better be good.

An idea-driven pot-boiler based on France's abortive attempt to set up a colony in Rio de Janeiro in 1555, *Rouge Brésil* is a novel which really belongs on shelves labeled young adult. Rufin's hero is young, tall, muscuclar, dark-eyed with curly black locks, courteous, responsible, loyal, a knight without fear and without reproach, a little naïve. His heroine is young, tall, blond-haired and blue-eyed, lithe, with small, firm breasts. She is intelligent, humane, playful, and good in ways that supplement the blind spots of the earnest hero. They form a perfect whole. Even their names, Just and Colombe (Righteousness and Dove), are an allegory for Christian perfection. The anti-heroine is a dark, primly dressed Protestant hypocrite who likes to play the victim, the kind of girl who whispers "save us" seductively while she helps plot the assassination of the colonial governor. The villains are villainous: short, ugly, dark, with bad teeth, money-grubbing drinkers, traitors and fornicators all, except for the fallen angels, men like Villegagnon, the chief of the French expedition—a tall, once-muscular and dignified man who turns from Just and Colombe's paternal protector and chivalrous soldier into a paranoid and cruel religious murderer and torturer. There are loyal servants who speak only to divulge hidden truths and disloyal servants who are malicious gossips. The novel may take place in the 1550s, but the characters belong to 19th-century melodrama by way of Walter Scott, Chateaubriand, and that most treacly of early French novels, *Paul et Virginie*. Did I mention that the savages are noble, naked, and muscular (though not tall)? They are free in their way, but like to submit to the authority of bold, kind, culturally sensitive Europeans who happen to be French.

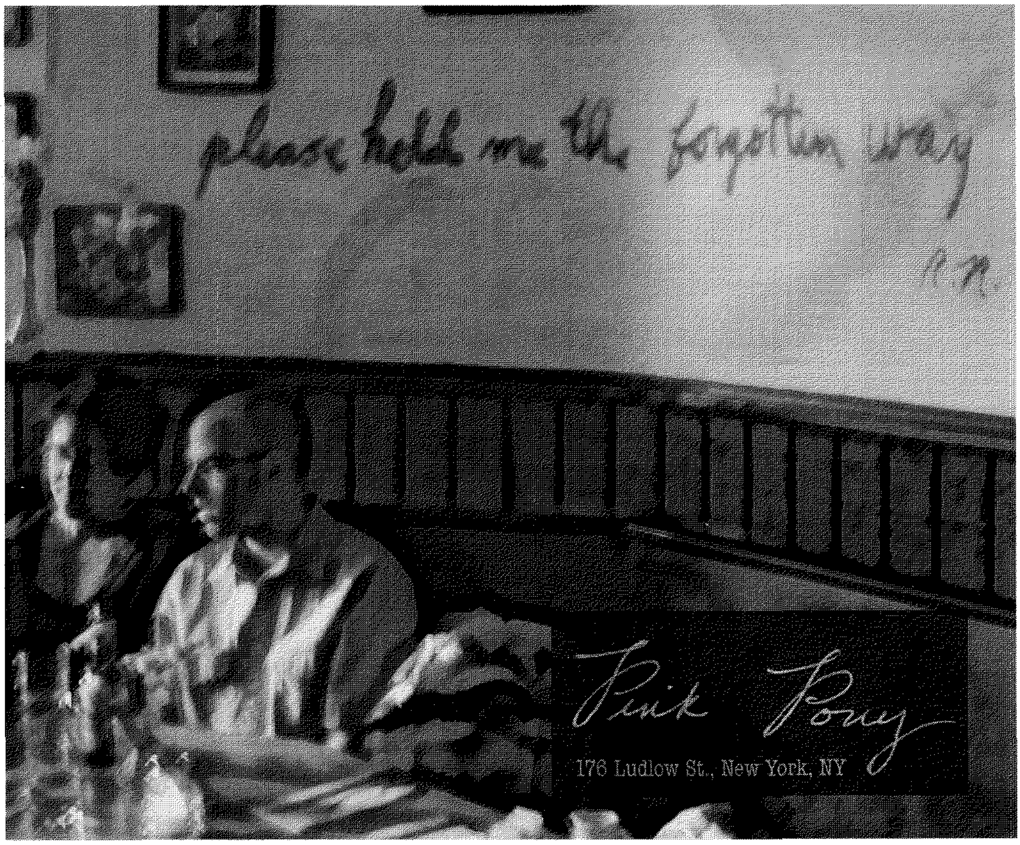
The setting is the bay of Rio de Janeiro in its unspoilt primitive splendor. There are palm trees, exotic flowers, white-sand beaches, manioc roots, tapirs, and red butterflies. Rufin has done his research, that must be said. The details of the French colony down to the laundry lists are rendered in a static and repetitive way that suggests accuracy, or at least fidelity to a source. His descriptions of the Indians are taken from numerous accounts, 16th-century as well as contemporary anthropological. Everything is true, Rufin informs us in an afterword. Of course it is. Everything, that is, except the novel's baroque plot and sense of character, which follow now Ptolemaic-seeming laws of 17th-century Romance or fifties Hollywood epic. While under threat of Portugese invasion, the French colony dissolves in internal dissension between Catholics, Huguenots, coastline traders out for profits, and Villegagnon, who is after greater glory for his sovereign. Frustrated by the pettiness of the colonists and alive to the hypocrisy of their civilizing mission, boy and girl head off into the tropical sunset, the mystery of their parentage revealed just in time to prevent anything unwholesome. Inside the rainforest they live in symbiotic harmony with the soon-to-be-wiped-out natives—a prefiguration of a Euro-Indian utopia that will never exist. Ridley Scott should direct, but it will probably be Luc Besson.

In the invisible treaty that divided up the world's cultural markets, it has long been France's privilege to produce pulp fiction for intellectuals and to have intellectuals who produce pulp fiction. It becomes clear that Rufin sets up his Brazil as a screen for a slightly displaced fantasy of his own life: helping various natives to lead healthier lives while fighting off the interference of bad Europeans, whether they are capitalists, expansionist-minded nationalists, or religious utopians.

Rouge Brésil is trash, but at least it's not thoughtless trash. Despite the clichés, the romantic silliness, and the Hollywood dialogue, there is a real attempt to come to terms with liberty and happiness in their conflicting political and existential senses.

The modern state offers us a false Hobbesian bargain. Either we live free in a facsimile of the exciting and competitive state of nature or we surrender our liberty for the security and material comfort we call happiness. Rufin wishes it were not so. His writing is at its best when he manages to step back from his characters to raise these themes, while staying inside the world he has made for them. When Colombe, who has been dressed as a boy to avoid difficulties with the all-male colonial crew, flees the increasingly brutal and troubled colony and joins the Indian tribes, he sends her off with a blessing that is at once nostalgiac and hopeful:

> Above all, she was happy to have dropped the mask and doubly affirmed her liberty: by revealing her true identity and by showing that, as a woman, she was not forced to shut herself up in those other prisons of modesty, false chastity, and flowing dresses. At that moment, running amidst the bunches of euphorbia and frangipani, her body cured and caressed by tribal markings, young and lithe like the engorged leaves of rubber trees, she felt herself at the crossroads of all capabilities


please hold me the forgotten way
Pink Pony
176 Ludlow St., New York, NY

> and all sweetness, of all resolutions and all tenderness. No other place in the world, no other period in history, could have given her this liberty and this power. While the blue pallet of bay water rose above the trees she felt her spirit take on the same shadowless pastel shades of happiness.
>
> (*reviewer's translation*)

Part *Blue Lagoon* and part Percy Shelley, Colombe's flight allows full play to Rufin's fantasies, tinged with the pain that these are, now, nothing but fantasies. Such a taint of self-consciousness makes *Rouge Brésil* an interesting document, if not quite an interesting novel. What does the modern man of action, our new natural aristocrat, dream about? Of healthy young bodies allowed their natural rights. Of a society which acknowledges inequality, but an inequality of merit and health, not of wealth. Of a world in which liberty and happiness are one and the same.

FOR AMERICAN READERS this talk of liberty from a beret-wearing, cheese-eating, income-redistributing, cigarette-smoking, surrendering, collaborating Froggy (with ten weeks of paid vacation) will no doubt be gratifying. There are more good French—i.e. French like us—than we have been led to believe. A superficial reading of Rufin's latest and equally melodramatic novel, *Globalia*, gives the same impression. Again boy and girl—this time boy is Afro-American Aleutian and girl Moroccan-French—seek to fight free of a stifling, socially and scientifically engineered utopia. There, Rufin overtly criticizes what he calls "Totalitarian Democracy," and quotes de Tocqueville. Although he may intend this to be a warning about American dominance, he often sounds like one of our own libertarians making a brief against the welfare state. Rufin wants to stick up for a personal vision of liberty distinct from the American way, but too often, with his loose writing about the thrills of danger on the wild frontiers at the edge of civilization, he makes it seem like these are the same.

This is not the case. Mademoiselle Liberté, stepping over the fallen with bared breast, is a different creature from Mr. Freedom, her Anglo-American counterpart, at least as he is now. For us, freedom is but choosing. To be free means we choose our cars, our long-distance company, our music, our clothes, our jewelry—to pierce or not to pierce—and our leaders, all from a small and rigidly limited set of options. Liberty, as the condition that allows us to fulfill our natural potential—the undammed river—without external constraints from government or society, has nearly been lost from daily American life. If it survives at all, it is only as resentment at being told what to do and how to live best by those wiser than ourselves. The most fulfilling form of this negative liberty has become the exclusive right of corporations and the privilege of the executive branch—they are free from just about everything. After years of watered-down libertarianism that allows our legislators to sit back and relax while a Randian "Objectivist" dictates economic policy, the word 'liberty' increasingly signifies a dull negativity. No taxes, no environmental programs, no money for education, no public lands, only the kindness of corporations. In depriving ourselves of these, however, we deprive ourselves of the liberty to dream and clothe our dreams in solid and bright actuality without the anxieties of merely getting by. We have been left our straitened freedom to live, compete for diminishing resources, and die, a freedom we now wish to impose on everyone else.

Understood as a profession of faith by a French man of action, *Rouge Brésil* is more political than literary. The award of the Prix Goncourt three years ago came down as an official endorsement of Rufin's fantasies of healthy modern Gallic chivalry against the degeneracy of more stylistically polished rivals like Michel Houellebecq. As an export, *Rouge Brésil* has none of the artisanal merits the French like to claim for their products. It does however provide us with a necessary aid, like Lafayette supporting Washington. Here we are treated to the spectacle of a man who has a natural impulse to do real good, not just use the word until it is empty of meaning. Not only has he actually helped people, but he gives free rein to his cheery fantasies of natural goodness—as embarrassing to contemplate as all improperly mediated fantasies are. Here is a man willing to make a fool of himself on paper in a thoughtful way. He has even dedicated time to historical research—even though all he wished was to make a fool of himself in a thoughtful way.

Rufin dreams of a world of pretty naked bodies of all colors. He wishes to harmonize the traits of Amazonian natives and European aristocrats, two tribes whose ways of life are equally doomed by capitalism. Rufin's utopia of the raw and the perfectly cooked never could have existed and, sadly, it never will. But perhaps some different beauty can be born. A new liberty maybe? Rufin feels the pangs of such a need. He has something of the can-do, frontier spirit of the imagination that used to be American: arrogant, doggedly inexhaustible and exhausting to others, a bit stupid in a sentimental way, but necessary.

—MARCO ROTH

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE!

David Foster Wallace. *Oblivion.*
Little, Brown & Company. June 2004.

WHERE TO GO after *Infinite Jest*? David Foster Wallace's 1996 opus now looks like the central American novel of the past thirty years, a dense star for lesser work to orbit. More than that: even the writers from whom he borrowed and stole are coming to seem like satellites. Take Don DeLillo, whose Logos College Wallace tore down brick by brick and rebuilt as the Enfield Tennis Academy. The coach who observes practice from a Melvillean crow's nest; the athlete who would rather do play-by-play than play; the apocalyptic war games; even the unlikely construction, "Everything he knew about *x* could be inscribed on the rim of a shotglass with a blunt crayon"—all this and more traveled straight from DeLillo's *End Zone* (a wonderful and underrated novel) into *Infinite Jest*, but Wallace is so securely his own writer, so natural and idiosyncratic in his prose, so committed to his principles of expansion and a circling, shambling refusal to simplify, that the influence seems to flow both ways, and much of early DeLillo comes to read like a ramping-up toward Wallace.

It was nice to know, at last, that there was a certifiable genius at work, and one could feel the anticipation mounting for the next Wallace effort, which would not only claim the awards denied *Infinite Jest*, but also galvanize public discussion in a rare way, like *Catch-22* or the first final episode of *Friends*. Would the new novel be even bigger? (It seemed both logical and unlikely.) Or would Wallace pare out what many considered extraneous, leaving us with the leanest, meanest, 500-page novel in recent memory? When asked about his work-in-progress, Wallace responded by inquiring whether his interlocutor had ever read the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, and, if so, whether he had done so under the influence of hallucinogens. There were rumors that the new novel had to do with porn.

Eight years, of course, is not so long to wait. *Moby-Dick* may have been written in six months, but a gestation period measured in decades seems to be a salient feature of the long modernist novel since Joyce. Our writers have longer life spans and fewer children than their forerunners, and Pynchon, Gaddis, Henry Roth, and Franzen all asserted their right to greater leisure. What distinguishes Wallace is his diverse and rather prolific interim output: a demonically descriptive collection of quasijournalistic essays; a brilliant if uneven book of stories; a biography of the concept of infinity, which reads miserably if you don't know much about higher math, and, according to expert reviewers, more miserably if you do; and now another book of stories, *Oblivion*. Has a novelist ever written such a thrilling, remarkable novel and then swapped himself, even temporarily, out of the genre?

COMPARED TO THE premeditated formal performances of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, his previous collection, much of *Oblivion* has a loose, tossed-off feel. Improvisations done in a certain period can tend toward similarities of theme and structure, and such is the case here. Whereas much of Wallace's work has been marked by an exuberant willingness to adopt the accents and idiolects of culturally, racially, sexually, and economically diverse characters, it's surprisingly easy to construct a composite sketch of *Oblivion*'s several protagonists: he is a flabby, heterosexual male in his late thirties, with a midlevel corporate job, a beleaguered or nonexistent love life, a habit of curling scare-quotes around a few too many of his words, and a vocabulary that Wallace himself would no doubt describe as "literally incredible." He has probably been through therapy, and he may, beneath his guise of placid normalcy, be contemplating suicide or murder.

It's unlikely that Wallace, who proceeded quickly from Amherst to Arizona State to literary maturity, has ever done any kind of corporate work, unless you count holding the Disney professorship of creative writing at Pomona College, but he is our foremost observer of the bureaucrat's air-conditioned spaces, of boardrooms and elevators and airplane cabins. You will find no adulterous professors or writing-workshop spoofs in his fiction. He is fascinated by the way corporations use psychological cunning and sophisticated observation to discover their constituents' most basic needs and fears, to find the salient detail that will grant them access to a soul. It is, ultimately, a novelist's work, turned to sinister purpose. Wallace knows this well, and he knows how to pass his fascination along to readers. The narrator of "Mr. Squishy," for instance, spends dozens of pages dissecting the intellectual underpinnings of

Baudelaire racked up
lifelong debts with
tailors and
bootmakers in order
to transform himself
into the ultimate
antibohemian.

Because that's what it takes.

n+1

an ad campaign for an upscale Ding-Dong. Even though the consequences for plot and character are scant, it's riveting stuff.

Wallace has less success when he attempts to dramatize the ways in which corporate America crushes its employees. We know that Terry Schmidt, the doughy anti-hero of "Mr. Squishy," has been breeding deadly cultures in his home laboratory, with an eye toward injecting them into the products he's paid to test-market, but we have only the most platitudinous ideas why: He's fat and dumpy and friendless, harbors an unrequited crush for a coworker, and has "very nearly nothing left anymore of the delusion that he differs from the great herd of the common run of men." This is the political-sentimental territory that George Saunders mines so relentlessly well; Wallace can do it too, but here he leaves us to languish in stereotype, allowing banal facts of personal history—"His high-school PE teacher had once referred to Terry Schmidt in front of his peers as the Crisco Kid"—to substitute for character. Schmidt, *qua* loser, never becomes more than generic.

Like *Infinite Jest*, some of the stories in *Oblivion* derive their narrative momentum from distinct, asymptotic plot lines that draw nearer and nearer to one another but never quite converge. There is a superabundance of data to be sifted through, all of it accurate but much of it irrelevant or unmarked. For Wallace, plot is paradox—the given information can be parsed in various and often contradictory ways. The successful Wallace plot resonates without being resolved; in fact, it resonates even as it deteriorates, and the desire to know what happened races neck and neck with the growing suspicion that one can never *really* know what happened. This can make it daunting to read him in proofs, before the most devoted of his fans have combed through the text for plot-clues and posted their findings on-line.

And comb through they do. Wallace inspires a Trekkie-like allegiance from his admirers, partly because of the insularity of his fictional worlds. His technique of piling on information before it can be assimilated, combined with his reflexive use of acronyms, nicknames, and unfamiliar designations (metric measurements, "Year of Glad") force readers to endure a period of initiation to his work. Those who survive the hazing often emerge with a fierce devotion. In this way, Wallace's technique may be seen as a hybrid of the high-modernist refusal to assist the reader, and the fantasy-sci-fi method of semi-allegorical substitution, which serves to create a parallel world that can simultaneously comment upon and remain more beguiling than our own.

It feels strange, therefore, when Wallace's parallel world collides with our own, as in "The Suffering Channel," the novella-length piece that closes the collection. Formally speaking, it's the most "normal" story in *Oblivion*, employing a straightforward third-person-limited narration, clearly demarcated dialogue, and adjective-rich descriptions of living rooms and thunderstorms. It's also a ninety-page story about a guy named Brint Moltke who shits out intricately rendered shit-sculptures. There is shit on every page; few things are spoken of but shit. On the one hand, Wallace seems to be shouting a loud obscenity at the critics who call him intractable; on the other, he pursues his absurd premise with such stony persistence that I was left with the nagging thought that everything in the story had actually happened. It required a late-night Google search on "Brint Moltke" to disabuse me of the notion.

Then, in the penultimate section of "The Suffering Channel," things grow truly strange. We have already been offered a few hints as to what might be in the offing—it is the summer of 2001, and the headquarters of *Style* magazine are located at 1 World Trade Center—when two minor characters head down into the WTC's subterranean fitness center to work the elliptical machines and discuss *Style*'s upcoming story about "'the miraculous poo man.'" One of these characters, known only as "the executive intern," is the darling of *Style*, a statuesque, intuitively brilliant beauty "who looks like something out of Norse mythology." While showering and dressing, she solves the problem of how to package the shit-artist's story for public consumption, whereupon Wallace ends the section this way: "The executive intern never brushed her hair after a shower. She just gave her head two or three shakes and let it fall gloriously where it might and turned, slightly . . . She had ten weeks to live."

She had ten weeks to live—a syntactically simple sentence, and by far the most baffling in Wallace's oeuvre. Not only for its apparent sentimentality, which sweeps in from nowhere and swiftly departs (elsewhere the women of *Style* are satirized mercilessly), but also for its insistence that Wallace's fictional worlds intersect our own. Is he that sort of writer? Should he be? It's as if a German battalion wandered into Middle-earth without so much as a costume change. Or, perhaps more appropriately, as if the carpet-bombing of Japan could be heard in Yoknapatawpha. Wallace and Faulkner are decidedly political writers; their characters strive against, or are paralyzed or corrupted by, corrosive social forces that corroborate and shed light on those at large in the world. But they are hermetic writers as well, and external events cannot be imported smoothly into their fiction. Wallace surely knows this, and we know that he knows, which partly explains why "The Suffering Channel" has such a strange effect; he goes ahead and does it anyway.

OBLIVION CONTAINS ONE indisputable masterpiece, "Good Old Neon," which garnered an O. Henry Award in 2002. The story is narrated from beyond the grave by a handsome, successful guy who has committed suicide, and whose voice penetrates instantly, as an eerily blunt, suddenly externalized version of what must be a nearly ubiquitous line of thought:

> My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired.... But then, once I got the best grade or made All City or got Angela Mead to let me put my hand on her breast, I wouldn't feel much of anything except maybe fear that I wouldn't be able to get it again. The next time or next thing I wanted. I remember being down in the rec room in Angela Mead's basement on the couch and having her let me get my hand up under her blouse and not even really feeling the soft aliveness or whatever of her breast because all I was doing was thinking, 'Now I'm the guy that Mead let get to second with her.' Later that seemed so sad.

At story's end, this narrative "I" is peeled back, revealing a David Wallace who's gazing at a picture of an acquaintance in an old high-school yearbook, "trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven himself to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way." This authorial intervention works perfectly, in part because the story does not need it. Each narrative voice succeeds on its own, and together they harmonize.

APART FROM "THE SUFFERING CHANNEL" and "Good Old Neon," *Oblivion* has a casual feel. There are, for instance, a surprising number of pointless dream sequences. It does not feel like main work, and it sends us rather quickly back to the question of when the novel will come. Not because a novel has inherently greater value than a set of stories, but because Wallace is a capacious writer, and he needs the extra room. As the narrator of "Good Old Neon" says, "It's interesting if you really think about it, how clumsy and laborious it seems to be to convey even the smallest thing."

The truth is, Wallace has already written his next big novel—it's called *The Corrections.* Jonathan Franzen, during the public rounds that followed the book's release, described Wallace as his "main rival," and said that *Infinite Jest* "got me working, the way that competition will get you working." These remarks provide more insight into the making of *The Corrections* than Franzen's elegant, infamous *Harper's* essay, which outlined his partially restored faith in the possibilities of the American social novel, and, not incidentally, hit the newsstands just three months after *Infinite Jest* (complete with Franzen blurb) hit the shelves. Anyone who has read Franzen's early work knows that his prose underwent a profound transformation between *Strong Motion* (1992) and *The Corrections* (2001). *Infinite Jest* paved the way for this change, both by pointing out the poetry latent in the English language's ever expanding stock of medical, technical, and pop-psychological jargon, and by demonstrating afresh that social critique, comedy, and compassion for one's characters are not incompatible. *The Corrections* took these lessons dearly to heart. Then there is the matter of plot: Franzen has said that early drafts dealt extensively in "the stock market, insider trading and prisons," whereas the published novel's plot is anchored by a much-rumored, creepingly ubiquitous drug that threatens to render emotional complexity moot by flattening affect and intellect into a slobbering consumerist ease—replace "drug" with "video" and you have the plot of *Infinite Jest.* The two books are distinguished by differences in emphasis and execution (Franzen's, for instance, includes a flock of impossibly alluring women), but the central question, regarding the future of thinking, feeling, and suffering—and therefore novel-writing—in a technocratic age remains the same. *The Corrections*, ultimately, cannot be imagined without the example of *Infinite Jest.* Even Franzen's selection of his fictional family's surname (lambert, *n.*: the centimeter-gram-second unit of brightness equal to the brightness of a perfectly diffusing surface…) must be read either as conscious or unconscious homage to Wallace's Incandenzas.

None of this is meant to diminish or demean Franzen's accomplishment. *The Corrections*, especially in Chip and Gary's paired novellas, where we feel with such alarming immediacy the steady impingements of the social upon the personal, is a marvelous novel, more than deserving of its laurels. It cannot escape the shadow of *Infinite Jest*, and it does not need to. But *The Corrections* is interesting precisely because it stakes out the direction in which Wallace will not go: toward a streamlining or distillation of the methods of *Infinite Jest*, into a more concise, "readable" version of the modern, multi-character social novel. The next Wallace novel, when it arrives, may in fact look less like *The Corrections* than like *Correction*, the Austrian Thomas Bernhard's masterly novel of 1975: an almost essayistic first-person narration, hundred-page paragraphs, and an endlessly iterative lyricism that seeks to mimic the centripetal movements of an obsessive mind.

To judge by "Octet" and "Good Old Neon," two of the best Wallace stories of recent years, he seems increasingly eager to tear down the fourth wall—or, as the narrator of "Octet" calls it, to "palpate" the reader directly—by introducing an authorial presence into the midst of his fiction: *David Foster Wallace is speaking to you, and here is why.* Fourth-wall-breaking constitutes a central technique for the metafictionists with whom Wallace has so often been grouped. But while the means are similar, Wallace pursues them to different ends. He has no interest in highlighting the artificiality of his art, which is and should be self-evident, but rather in communicating thought and feeling as directly as possible without shirking their complexity. The metafictionist's tools have become part of his standard arsenal, to be used to supplement his talent for self-effacing storytelling and otherwise set aside. Wallace's goal, finally, is to grant us complete access to his characters' inner lives, while reminding us that such access must always be incomplete. It's a brave and paradoxical task worthy of his full attention, and ours.

—CHAD HARBACH

FILE IT UNDER SECULAR NEGLECT

James McCourt. *Queer Street: Rise and Fall of an American Culture, 1947-1985.*
W. W. Norton. November 2003.

THERE WAS ONCE an entire opera community in this town that did not merely read the novels of James McCourt, but believed in them. We quoted joyfully from *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* or *Kaye Wayfaring in "Avenged"*—his sublime yet irreverent comedies of New York City and Hollywood, movies and opera—applying lines from the books to the events of our lives. "There was some fainting, but it was controlled," *Mawrdew* reads, and a friend reiterated it *viz* a Met Mirella Freni *Manon Lescaut* I missed. "That woman gives herself *airs*!" one McCourt character snaps about another; it was repeated to me in the middle of an ACT UP demonstration about (of all people) Nancy Reagan. I bring this up because many of McCourt's original readership, his true believers, will not be able to savor *Queer Street*: every member of my own opera circle (for example), aside from myself and maybe one other, missing-in-action devotee, has died.

My old friends are also missing something of a McCourt renaissance after years of neglect. The cover of *Queer Street* reproduces a 1956 map of lower Manhattan preening and swelling more like a penis than ever. Inside, the memoir / scrapbook / polemic / fantasia, McCourt's first book of nonfiction, shows a great writer doing what he must when facing problems of perception and recognition: blasting away with every atom in his lexicon. The sheer gall of the thing (and Norton's right-behind-you presentation of it) awes even this veteran McCourtian. And yet *Queer Street* is receiving the extended, intelligent, serious treatment hitherto denied this writer, and has already gone into a second printing. *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* is back (New York Review Books, with a smashing cover and a graceful Wayne Koestenbaum intro); rumors of additional reprints are about. What has changed?

FIRST, WHAT HASN'T: McCourt. He has not become any less difficult: his work is abundant, digressive, non-linear, satirical, incendiary—and more demanding than that of any living American fiction writer except Pynchon. (Cormac McCarthy seems nearly accessible by comparison.) One needs help just to pronounce the title of his first novel (repeat after me: "Mardu Gorgeous"). That book appeared in 1975. Through the years and books since—*Kaye Wayfaring in "Avenged"* (1985), *Time Remaining* (1993), *Delancey's Way* (2000), and *Wayfaring at Waverly in Silverlake* (2002)—he has given us some of the busiest talkers in American letters, industrious beings who live to create or to follow those who do. Gossip is manna and menace to all of them, including *Mawrdew*'s Archbishop of New York City ("His Scarlet Eminence"), who, upstaged by a mysterious opera diva at his own Saint Patrick's Day parade, "drafty in taffeta on the steps of the Cathedral at Fiftieth Street, that day learned a lesson in humility. (He filed it under 'Secular Neglect.')"

In McCourt's sentences—densely constructed, bristling with imagistic and sonic virtuosity—the fantastic, even the miraculous, might appear like parade floats mocked by wisecracks. ("The Pope saw Christ come and go.") In none of McCourt will the more demanding passages be preceded and followed by slower, simply cadenced catch-ups (as in Toni Morrison). His great themes are the heroic conduct of life and the saving grace of inspiration and expression—aspects of existence that once mattered to many gay men as much as their sexual desires did.

His characters are outsiders who create their own communities. And they aren't waiting for mainstream admission; they don't have time. More than any other writer, McCourt preserves the intense, racy, hidden headiness of gay existence. "Apocryphal tearoom story," he writes in *Queer Street*:

> In a late-night cop raid, after the opera, the ballet and the theater crowd had long gone home, as the pursued felons dispersed, haring down platforms, leaping over turnstiles, jumping down onto the tracks and disappearing in the tunnels full of sewer rats, where they hoped to be spared death by oncoming local trains, one voice calling wildly, "Stay alive—I'll find you!"
>
> Fascinating, all of it, but there must be a way to access The Life upstairs in the open air.

The immersion is so quick some readers can sail with it; others need a sextant. A "tearoom story" is one about casual, often public sex, conducted anyplace it's momentarily private and dark enough to be intimate with someone you've perhaps neither met nor spoken to (nor would ever want to) but desperately want to *feel*. Yet there is more than a history lesson at hand: note the over-the-top "Stay alive—I'll find you!"—an example of Hollywood recasting the actual, dramatizing it, at a time when gay people felt not real (as in "normal") but *un*real (as in "abnormal") and so took daily refuge in imitation, dissemblance, and covert sex. Then the narrator mocks the story itself ("Fascinating," a useful gay putdown, then and now), switching to a near-pleading inference that there *is* more to these absurd lives, more than being disguised and hunted, more than loving in the dark.

For over thirty years McCourt has been writing of people considered outside the mainstream, whether for what they do sexu-

One bird will eat
brown grubs
in distinction to one
who eats black.

But a common
ancestor
ate something
better than grubs.

n+1

ally, or what they love (opera), or for their politics. (In *Delancey's Way*, the only McCourt work to stray from his holy cities of New York and Los Angeles, the title character applies his speed-of-light wit and temper to Washington D.C.'s capital gang living it up during the Clinton Wars.) His writing is not apologetic but impertinent, fearless; he doesn't resort to the accommodating gravitas of a Michael Cunningham or David Leavitt, the continental dash of an Edmund White. He is, instead, gloriously, all-knowingly *out there*, never more so than when he exhibits a community fundamental we were Not To Give Away: that unrepentant reveling in what we can really say and do when unfettered, that way we could, sometimes inappropriately, rouse ourselves to fight opponents into a corner and then rear back with an "And I don't care what *you* think!" panache. Gays aren't supposed to shove their indignation and abilities into straight people's faces—in bed or in literature. Sass, back talk, queer lip—as McCourt demonstrates in *Queer Street*, these are a license to get locked up:

> One had to be cautious whom one cruised on the street as well, as certain grinning souls, eyes merry, would slip the cuffs on (and this not fetish but vocation) at the first hint of suggestion . . . even if, wary from some sixth or seventh sense, one had neither suggested nor hinted . . . . The young don't believe it, but so it was: you risked a night in stir, a record ever stained, by smiling on the street, especially toward the end of the month when the boys had a quota to fill. It was not ever pleasant. The fear cannot be designated tang.

THAT MUCH, AT least, has changed. When *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* was published, few noticed its scarcity of out gay characters, or even the very word. That book was aimed for a readership more than likely to be in on its jokes, decipher its lingo, live to a sympathetic rhythm. Although well reviewed, it and later books vanished, partially because few journalists and critics covered them: gay-by-association was until recently a potent weapon—just ask Magic Johnson.

But there is more to this neglect of McCourt. Writers from an excluded group who demonstrate how much better they can write than their alleged superiors are hardly appreciated. Nor has McCourt ingratiated himself to standard-bearers with a compulsively punning, jabbing, wisecracking wit he wields so flawlessly that his edgier passages swish like rapiers. McCourt champions are out there (Harold Bloom, Susan Sontag), but rare. *Queer Street*'s reviews suggest more of us find homosexuality less threatening these days; so it may be no coincidence that McCourt has produced a new work so candid and comprehensive the rest of his canon may have to be positioned in relation to it.

Aware there is much at stake, the author goes for broke. Like Milton revving up before the Almighty in *Paradise Lost*, McCourt commences with an Argument: we get the dates, we get the scene, and then are told: "Other voices in other rooms (and often other doorways, other park benches, other lobbies, other cafeterias) constitute the Whitmanian New York topos." Certain cultural and religious icons are invoked, from Alfred Hitchcock and Leonard Bernstein to Dorothy Day. ("Dorothy, who has the patience of Job fused to the temperament of Medea, does not hate faggots. It is merely that they exasperate her.") There are also lesser-knowns, like Father Bernard Lynch, who risked Vatican opprobrium to say Mass to unashamedly gay Catholics and people with AIDS, and who was "a gorgeous Irish priest. When cruised in Central Park he would stop, smile and say 'I'm booked.' He meant, of course, by the Lord." Speaking of God, there is the sacred status of Bette Davis and her movies, and constant quotes and poses from both; near book's end the beatific one puts in an appearance. Divinity equals creative authority in McCourt's world, and those who invent and have fun with words and actions and art are its initiates.

But for any gay writer, authority must always wrestle with safety, the acquired habit of what Joyce termed silence, exile (from heterosexuality and its discontents, in this case), and cunning. Widening tolerance or no, gay people still conceal themselves to survive. Before, we had to take cover completely, sometimes entering into marriage (or the priesthood) as part of the act, but also by getting out there as if to prove we had nothing to hide: hence the old excuses, "he's so theatrical" or "she's a madcap." Today, the mask is of assimilation, the lengths to which we'll assure heterosexuals of our unthreatening ordinariness—anything to forestall awareness of fundamental and essential *difference*, recognition we do things with our bodies the majority doesn't, or does but finds unholy.

Masks remain the creative vehicle of gay artists. Proust's Albertine in real life wore a mustache and flew an airplane (crashing, drowning, and emerging from the waves with a sex change once Proust felt the need of a great love). (Maybe Albertine's discarded penis drifted across the Atlantic into New York waters to wind up on the cover of *Queer Street.*) The *tone* of a gay writer's prose must also bear disguise: whether your readers can handle the truth about how you live and must write bedevils gay writers to this day, spurring all sorts of morbid symptoms. (Consider Dale Peck as a gay Jekyll and Hyde, his fiction assuming the innocent, abused position, the criticism—for want of a better term—the punishing, guilty one.) In McCourt we are hyperconscious of masks: he dons and describes them, fools you into thinking his narrator is not wearing one when he is (or is when he isn't), doffs and goes eye-to-eye with masks, like Hamlet scrutinizing Yorick's skull.

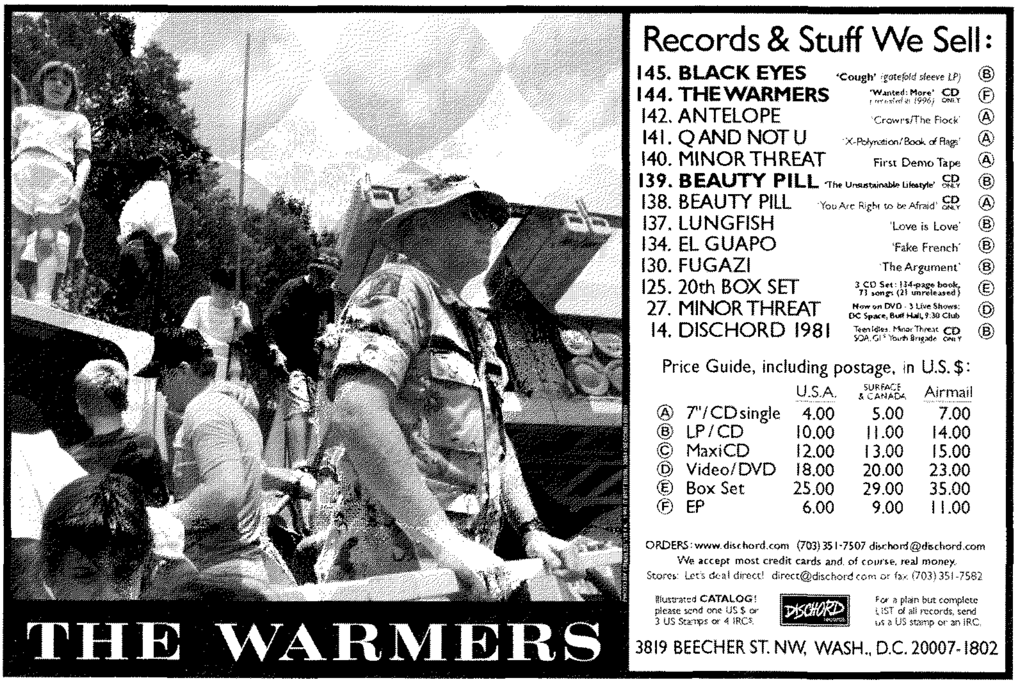
Suffering identity loss to find a truer one is a characteristic McCourt destiny. In *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, the heroine collapses while singing an opening-night Isolde at the Met, and the book plunges into a dizzying, poignant scherzo of lost identities and attempts at truth (recognition scene parodies included) from which Czgowchwz emerges with "a *life* as distinct from a career." Our masks, McCourt believes, needn't be worn for life—unless it's through them that we most truly live.

NEW YORK HAS not so much doffed its own masks of sophistication and grace as had them ripped off and replaced by newer yet gaudier façades. *Queer Street* began as a collection of previously published pieces, but its author soon developed a strategy that seems part *Speak, Memory*, and part Beckett. Nabokov fled murdered Russia and strangled Europe to America (rewriting himself into English); Beckett emerged first from revolutionary Ireland, then from postwar France (and rewrote himself into French); McCourt hasn't gone anywhere—but his world also resembles one crumbling, and his language reflects this fall. When his books were new, much of Old New York still set the tone for the city; several years and an orgy of redevelopment and gentrification later, Gotham is a phantom. To resurrect it, at least on the page, McCourt poofs a doppelganger, "QT," for "Queer Temperament," a particularly savvy consciousness. ("QT" is also a pun. Judging by the photos in collages deployed throughout the book—designed by Vincent Virga, McCourt's companion and author of the classic gothic *Gaywyck*—it's accurate.)

QT guides us through his five-borough kingdom in his terse but rich voice—"A salon, dear, in Purgatory," he writes of the baths, "with partitions more palpable than masks. You could pretend you didn't know who was doing what. You could pretend you knew. Everyone knew." But there is too much to get in, too many moments, and not enough time; with so much to say QT sometimes resorts to lists, and other voices swirl amid his own in a mediumistic flood. These are true and moving even though in most cases we never know anything about them but their words.

The language of these people whom American literature has seldom bothered to register is so precise and vivid that we read *and* hear them: the eager young cultural acolyte, the mensch whose hyperbole has been corrupted by advertising lingo (it happened even back then), the cultural encyclopedist who cannot get to revelation without passing citation and quotation, and the simple, unaffected voices of men (women are less frequent) who can stop us dead in the middle of the page with their convincingness. In opera, voice bares the soul; so does McCourt's writing. This dazzling fluency can swell into a discordant yet exultant community speech: wildly funny, gradually disquieting, yet increasingly beautiful, an auditory resuscitation of the silenced.

For all we have left are these invocation-voices. Maybe you need to have lived through the AIDS epidemic, making daily phone calls to friends or fellow AIDS workers to ask, "Who died last night?" or throwing out another address book freighted with too many dead names, to feel the ache shadowing McCourt's testimonies. Gay life defies standard memoir protocol: fear of detection and punishment created this life of abbreviated, shrouded relationships with people we cherished even if they were only a face on the opera standing-room line, or a voice (or body) in the dark. McCourt's composition strategy renders the *kind* of world this was with uncanny power.



Records & Stuff We Sell:

145. BLACK EYES 'Cough' (gatefold sleeve LP) Ⓑ
144. THE WARMERS 'Wanted: More' (recorded in 1996) CD ONLY Ⓕ
142. ANTELOPE 'Crowns/The Flock' Ⓐ
141. Q AND NOT U 'X-Polynation/Book of Flags' Ⓐ
140. MINOR THREAT First Demo Tape Ⓐ
139. BEAUTY PILL 'The Unsustainable Lifestyle' CD ONLY Ⓑ
138. BEAUTY PILL 'You Are Right to be Afraid' CD ONLY Ⓐ
137. LUNGFISH 'Love is Love' Ⓑ
134. EL GUAPO 'Fake French' Ⓑ
130. FUGAZI 'The Argument' Ⓑ
125. 20th BOX SET 3 CD Set: 134-page book, 73 songs (21 unreleased) Ⓔ
27. MINOR THREAT Now on DVD - 3 Live Shows: DC Space, Buff Hall, 9:30 Club Ⓓ
14. DISCHORD 1981 Teen Idles, Minor Threat, SOA, GI's, Youth Brigade CD ONLY Ⓑ

Price Guide, including postage, in U.S. $:

	U.S.A.	SURFACE & CANADA	Airmail
Ⓐ 7"/CD single	4.00	5.00	7.00
Ⓑ LP/CD	10.00	11.00	14.00
Ⓒ MaxiCD	12.00	13.00	15.00
Ⓓ Video/DVD	18.00	20.00	23.00
Ⓔ Box Set	25.00	29.00	35.00
Ⓕ EP	6.00	9.00	11.00

ORDERS: www.dischord.com (703) 351-7507 dischord@dischord.com
We accept most credit cards and, of course, real money.
Stores: Let's deal direct! direct@dischord.com or fax (703) 351-7582

Illustrated **CATALOG!** please send one US $ or 3 US Stamps or 4 IRCs.

DISCHORD records

For a plain but complete LIST of all records, send us a US stamp or an IRC.

3819 BEECHER ST. NW, WASH., D.C. 20007-1802

And now it's over. With the promise of better times, gay people have fled their own culture as if all that was left of it was a charnel house, as if centuries of accumulated identity also perished from AIDS. But however visible we become, we'll always be an other—and it's in works of art that this otherness has been articulated most persuasively and permanently. As Proust knew, it's in art we rescue, confront, resolve whatever escapes or hides from our own lives; and in works like McCourt's *Time Remaining*, the life goes on alongside the awareness of its end. Passages on the recent past contend with the accelerating dirge of the falling, and the abandonment of the culture that contained but also supported its denizens. "The whistle of the Train to Hell would sound in the night," begins a passage near the end of the book, and then proceeds:

> Oblivion is not a stop on thought's train; it can't be called out. Or, if it is, and can, it's a terminus you always seem to sleep through—the way I used to sometimes ride back and forth passed out on the F between Delancey Street and 179th in Jamaica. Nor are the Eleven Against Heaven gone anywhere like Oblivion. It still gets me how when I think back, I can *think them not yet dead*, and if I write this down—although they are dead, as I've said right at the beginning—that there will be in the telling a point at which *they will not yet have been dead.*

Literature is the transfiguring of that telling point, the demonstration that there is more to come after the end of the line. There is a way, after all, to make those voices and jokes and old tunes and times sound again, to keep their defiant gracefulness stirring the night air, and to invoke them not solely for the sake of memory, but for imaginations that otherwise would never know and be enriched by them. Who would have thought the truest American affirmation of Proust's literary theology would come not from some canonized straight writer but a Broadway baby taught to love on the sly, from an intelligence born in Jackson Heights and raised not only on Dante, Bruno, Vico, and Joyce but the Stonewall Inn (home of the riot), the inside of a paddy wagon (the first mobile tearoom), Douglas Sirk's spotlit irony, Stephen Sondheim's astringent harmony, and Bette Davis's *Dark Victory*?

Mainstream culture will never be the same—or shouldn't be: out of the death and oppression only just now in retreat, American literature has on its hands a remarkable and indispensable figure. Whether that literature deserves McCourt—can find a place for a writer this authentic, demanding and rewarding—is another question, one the authority and generosity of even this author cannot turn into a pun or a gag.

—PATRICK GILES

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

MASHA GESSEN is the former Moscow Bureau Chief for *U.S. News and World Report*. Her second book is forthcoming from Dial Press.

PATRICK GILES was an AIDS activist throughout the 1980s and '90s.

JOSHUA GLENN is the editor of *Hermenaut* and a columnist for the *Boston Globe*'s Ideas section.

SAM LIPSYTE's novel *Home Land* will be published by Picador in January 2005.

DUSHKO PETROVICH is a painter living in New York.

ENDNOTES

1. *Partisan Review* died last year. Or maybe it was the year before last. They must have finished the final issue in the winter, when the years overlap, so it's hard to say.

2. The *A&F Quarterly* also died last year, or maybe it was this year. Committed to sexing up the image of old preppie retailer Abercrombie and Fitch, the *Quarterly*'s final Christmas issue—celebrating group sex and ice hockey—was pulled from the shelves in the face of a massive campaign from the Christian right.

3. Through the forties and fifties, *PR* was the greatest of magazines. The *Quarterly*, for its part, was known in the late nineties for racy homoerotic photography and a fascination with Slavoj Zizek. You used to be able to buy old issues of *PR* at The Read, on Bedford Ave.; to see the *Quarterly*, you need to go to Guy Cimbalo's apartment.

4. Guy studied art history at Harvard, moved to Los Angeles, then returned to New York to write a book column for the *Quarterly*. He also flew out to London last year to solicit commentary on the photography for the 2003 "Back to School" issue from Zizek. The Giant of Ljubljana was in London for a conference, and Guy stayed at the same hotel as the other conferees. "There were Czechs, and Slovaks," he told me. "And Czechoslovaks. It was an awful hotel. I've never had rancid butter before, but they had it."

5. I read the Zizek issue in Guy's apartment underneath a giant blown-up photo of an Abercrombie girl running naked into the Western wind. The text, in capital letters, was some of Zizek's best work in years. "The only successful sexual relationship occurs when the fantasies of the partners overlap," he says about a series of images of boys and girls riding motor bikes and horses. "If the man fantasizes that making love is like riding a bike, and the woman wants to be penetrated by a stud, then what truly goes on while they make love is that a horse is riding a bike. With a fantasy like that, who needs a personality?"

6. We were going into the last week of production on this issue of *n+1* when I visited Guy. That was three weeks ago, and I developed an image then of Zizek pissing, not exactly into the wind, but sort of perpendicular to it. And I hoped we hadn't done that. I was pretty sure we hadn't. Sitting in that Abercrombie apartment, I felt like we—Guy and me and the rest of us—were at some breaking point in history. Those jokes, wherein you tweak the Man by suggesting gay sex or quoting Lacan: those are no longer funny. There are better ways to embarrass yourself. It is time to say what you mean.

7. Some day, perhaps, we too will run topless into that Western wind, heedless of consequence, celebrating the good life. But as a child's personality begins to form when it can say, *You are not me*, so we've begun by saying, No. Enough.

—*Keith Gessen*

El Greco is like waking up in the middle of the night and seeing triangles.
Guston is staying up and seeing french fries.
It was a punchy gray dream to see them togther.
"Art Chronicle"

+

Our controversial future is supposed to depend on engineered genes,
brain scans, neuroscience. About those things, we have loud, public,
sterile debates—while the real historic changes are accomplished
on a gym's vinyl mats, to the sound of a flywheel and a ratcheted inclined plane.
"Against Exercise"

+

Did I mention that the savages are noble, naked, and muscular (though not tall)?
They are free in their way, but like to submit to the authority of bold, kind,
culturally sensitive Europeans who happen to be French.
"On Jean-Christophe Rufin"

+

Some on the left compare W. to Hitler.
Nothing could be more wrong.
It is our embarrassing distinction in the United States to have acquired a follower
as our leader. You don't picture him on the podium at Nuremberg. No, you see
him in the third row of the crowd on the rally floor. Look for his face, there,
among the other sons!
"W."

+

His vices had never had to do with the famously intense
pleasures of sex or drink, though he'd liked both well enough.
He was a true voluptuary only when it came to the feeling
of which for some reason the taste of vanilla, or lemon cucumbers
or coconut meat, reminded him: the pleasure of being
subject to no one but yourself.
"Horse Mountain"